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The World's Oldest Science Fiction Magazine

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup>

## STORIES



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Barry B. Longyear  
Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Joe Clifford Faust  
Phillip C. Jennings



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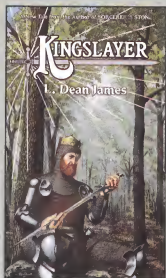


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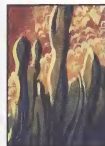
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# Why No Poetry?

Kim Mohan

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Two years ago, when we made a whole bunch of decisions all at once about the direction this magazine was going to take, one of those decisions was to discontinue the use of poetry.

As with a lot of decisions made in publishing, there's no single reason behind it; the cause-and-effect relationship isn't that simple. So, then, here are the reasons—not necessarily in order of importance—why this magazine no longer uses poetry in the same way it was used before.

First, I had a vision of what the new version of AMAZING® Stories would look like, graphically and typographically. I wanted the pages to be as clean and uncluttered as possible; I hoped for a presentation in which each piece of fiction could be considered a chapter within a book. And, just as you would find in a book, when a story (chapter) ended with a small swatch of type on the last page, the rest of that page would simply be left blank. (Okay, that plan hasn't worked out perfectly in all cases, but the *intent* is still there.)

Second (and a corollary to the above), I've never been comfortable, in previous incarnations of this magazine or any other similar publication, with the blatant use of poetry as filler: a piece of verse gets shoehorned in on the last page of a story that, for some strange reason, just happens to have enough space to accommodate that poem. Who are we kidding? That poem doesn't appear there just because it was a good

piece of writing—it appears there *primarily* because it's the right size for the space. It was bought (I would hope) because it's good, and it deserves to be printed. But the fact of where and when it was printed was based on the number of lines it contains. Call it a quirk, or anything else you want, but I've never been able to reconcile that rationale in my mind.

I have nothing against poetry as a literary form. Sometimes the best way for a writer to express a thought or an idea is through verse. I have great respect for poets, the same way I have respect for writers of prose fiction and for illustrators, because I don't presume to be able to do what they do. And maybe it's that respect for poets and poetry that makes me resist the idea of stuffing their work into any available nook or cranny.

So why don't we give verse a space of its own by using a poetry section in each issue, or maybe just once in a while? The answer to that question is centered on reason number three—I'm not convinced, based on the amount or the source of the reaction to our no-poetry policy, that a significant number of readers care about seeing verse in this magazine.

Very few people have written in to complain or express regret about the absence of poetry, and a sizable percentage of that group consists of people who *are* poets. With all due respect, it wasn't exactly a shock to discover that people who write poetry don't like our decision not to publish it. Even though I know I may be

putting my foot in it by saying this, I'll say it anyway: If a lot of readers who aren't poets barrage this office with protests and pleas, we would be obliged to rethink our policy. I've always made it clear, when giving information to market reports, that our policy is not to publish poetry *at this time*—leaving open the possibility that we'll change course if the wind shifts.

As evidence of the fact that we're not irrationally biased against verse, I'll start with Exhibit A: "the button, and what you know" by W. Gregory Stewart, which appeared in the June 1991 issue. I consider that a *story*, albeit one that is told using a structure and presentation that makes it look like a poem—and which, in that case, is absolutely the only way that story could have been told. (Incidentally, "the button" was included on the final ballot for the 1991 Nebula Award for Best Short Story—proving, if nothing else, that some other people also considered it a *story* as distinct from a *poem*.)

Exhibit B, in this issue, is "Alien Sonnets" by Charles Eckert, which depends on several elements of verse to drive the plot line—another imaginative use of the literary form in a fictional context.

What those two pieces of work demonstrate, I think, is that we don't really have a no-poetry policy. What we have is a desire, rather than relegating verse to an understudy's role, to restrict our use of it to occasions when it can take center stage. ♦

# Reflections

## Robert Silverberg

One of my favorites among my own books is the time-travel novel I published in 1969, *Up The Line*. It's partly a spoof of the clichés of earlier time-travel novels—the tangle of paradoxes, etc.—and partly a serious contribution to the time-travel literature in its own right.

A particular aspect of *Up The Line* that gave me special pleasure—and it was a book that was as much fun to write as anything I've ever done—was the chance it allowed me to take a revisionist look at a few classic moments of history. History, as the ancients knew, is a highly subjective art form—to the Greeks, history was simply one of the nine departments of literature, with a muse of its own (Clio) to keep company with the muses of epic poetry, of lyric poetry, of dance and song, etc. The implication was that history was no mere dry "objective" chronicle of absolute and unarguable facts setting forth a single unassailable truth, but rather something malleable, which an artist, through selectivity and interpretation, could shape into patterns that gave delight and nourishment to the spirit.

In our own time we have had all too many opportunities to see how easily history can be edited, revised, rearranged, and otherwise transformed. The historical record that one nation promotes as gospel is often regarded as a tissue of lies by that nation's adversary, which has its own version of the events—and a third nation's historian, viewing these

events from some distance in space or time, may well see both versions as wholly at variance with the actual facts as that historian perceives them.

As Vladimir Nabokov, himself a victim of Soviet oppression, put it in a 1969 interview, "If 'history' means a 'written account of events' (and that is about all Clio can claim), then let us inquire *who*, actually—what scribes, what secretaries—took it down and how qualified they were for the job. I am inclined to guess that a big part of 'history' . . . has been modified by mediocre writers and prejudiced observers. We know that police states (e.g. the Soviets) have actually snipped out and destroyed such past events in old books as did not conform to the falsehoods of the present. But even the most talented and conscientious historian may err. In other words, I do not believe that 'history' exists apart from the historian."

If we could go back and look at what really happened, of course—a camera's eye trained on the past—we would have a chance to eradicate some of the interpolated assumptions and misinterpretations and downright special pleading that historians of previous years have inserted in the record. (We would interpolate assumptions and misinterpretations of our own, I suppose, but at least for our own purposes we'd be getting closer to the actual reality, if such a thing exists at all, than we can by consulting the existing archives. The problem is that each generation introduces new biases and viewpoints

of its own, so that not even eyewitness experience can be trusted to deliver "truth"—but in the pursuit of that elusive commodity that we call truth it's preferable, at any rate, to form one's conclusions from an eyewitness experience of the phenomena than from someone else's account of them.

In *Up The Line*, which devotes most of its time-travel speculation to the era of the Byzantine Empire, I had some fun with the historians by doing just that: playing the old fly-on-the-wall game and pretending to reconstruct the *real* events of the Byzantine past (as witnessed by my time-traveling twenty-first-century characters) and contrasting them with the received accounts that we can read in the established studies of the period.

For example, I took a group of my time-tourists to the year 532 to witness the dedication of the Emperor Justinian's great Cathedral of Hagia Sophia—an event at which, according to a chronicler writing five centuries later, Justinian was overcome with awe at his own achievement, and fell on his knees in rapture, crying out, "O Solomon, I have surpassed thee!" In my account, though, Justinian notices a workman's scaffold that has accidentally been left hanging high up in the dome, and his first reaction on entering the building is to burst out with an angry torrent of sputtering obscenities. And so on. The book is full of sly little revisionist games of that sort.

(I was by no means the first writer to play those games, of course. That honor goes, I think, to Mark Twain, whose *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, written more than a century ago, provided a mercilessly funny and cruelly realistic view of Camelot and its denizens.)

What brought all this to my mind—the opportunity that science fiction gives us to create at least the pretense of actually observing the reality of past events—was a playful little piece by the same Vladimir Nabokov, in his book of essays and opinions *Strong Opinions*, in which he lists some scenes out of bygone times that he would like to have seen filmed:

— Shakespeare in the part of the King's Ghost.

— The beheading of Louis the Sixteenth, the drums drowning his speech on the scaffold.

— Herman Melville at breakfast, feeding a sardine to his cat.

— Poe's wedding. Lewis Carroll's picnics.

— The Russians leaving Alaska, delighted with the deal. Shot of a seal applauding.

Which set me wondering: What scenes would I like to see, if I could send a movie camera back in time? Scenes chosen not necessarily to correct our present-day view of the past, but to provide amplifications,

intensifications, and, where appropriate, corrections, or else just for the sheer whimsical hell of it. Very quickly I drew up the list that follows. (I think it's important to make the list *quickly*. You get to the heart of your immediate preoccupations that way, with no time for being self-consciously clever or deliberately erudite.) This is what I came up with:

— Mark Antony's funeral oration for Caesar—probably not as eloquent as Shakespeare's version of it, but quite likely an exceedingly crafty political document delivered under conditions of real stress.

— Mozart, decked out in full wig and formal garb, giving a harpsichord concert before the Austro-Hungarian nobility, age seven or eight.

— Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, staring upward from his scaffold and rubbing his sore neck, perhaps muttering a few Renaissance obscenities as he goes about his day's work of depicting God going about *His* day's work.

— Robert A. Heinlein in a white dinner jacket, unexpectedly materializing out of nowhere at the Hugo Award ceremony of thirty years ago to collect his trophy. (I was there, but I want a second chance to see how he worked that trick.)

— Napoleon crowning himself Emperor.

— Jefferson showing a rough

draft of the Declaration of Independence to Madison, Adams, and Franklin.

— Beethoven rehearsing the premiere performance of one of his symphonies with a tired, cranky orchestra that doesn't understand the music and would like to go home.

— Attila the Hun having dinner with a group of his lieutenants after a hard day's pillaging.

— Columbus going on board his flagship in the harbor at Palos and giving the order to set sail.

— Moses—not Charlton Heston—coming down from Mt. Sinai and reporting on his activities up there.

— The grassy knoll at Dallas, November 22, 1963, seen from several camera angles.

— Homer reciting the just-finished *Iliad* to a group of Athenian literary critics.

That's a dozen of mine. But this is a game we can all play, and so I'd like to see some of yours. Send them to me c/o AMAZING Stories, P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147, and Kim Mohan and I will pick out the six or seven most interesting lists to publish (with commentary) five or six months from now. Not a contest; no prizes offered, other than a chance to see your name in print, bringing with it the usual fifteen minutes of glorious fame. ♦



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# Letters

That was an interesting letter (February 1992) from Mark Lynch regarding a letter by Joel Wyatt about Orson Scott Card's novels. If Mr. Lynch is an aspiring writer, he'd be better off learning how to read a bit more accurately rather than learning how to write from Mr. Card's book on *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

Joel Wyatt's letter in the November 1991 issue did not say that Mr. Card didn't know anything about writing (if I read his letter correctly). He merely stated that Card is writing a kind of science fiction story that has characters speaking very much unlike the way men and women in the real world speak, and this is particularly true of Mr. Card's depiction of children. Moreover, Mr. Card's books do suffer a kind of literary ambition; they are turgidly written and are freighted with morality, lectures, and hokum. And despite Mark Lynch's objections, I'm afraid that Mr. Wyatt's observations were, for the most part, accurate. I wish I had written that letter.

I should also like to say that just because Mr. Card has won a dozen Hugos and Nebulas, it doesn't necessarily mean that he's a model young writers should embrace. I recall an Elvis album from my youth (which predates, I imagine, Mr. Card, Mr. Wyatt, and Mr. Lynch—and the whole AMAZING Stories staff as well) that said: "Twenty million Elvis fans can't be wrong!" As it happens—and I knew it then as I know it now—twenty million Elvis fans *can* be wrong. Popular success is only that—popular. It might or might not mean that we're dealing with a literary *wunderkind* in Mr. Card's not-inconsiderable opus.

I am, like Joel Wyatt, one of the growing number of readers who feel that there most definitely is a bug of ambition infecting Mr. Card. As a critic, he writes blarney; as a "presence," he is everywhere. I would recommend that Mr. Lynch, if he wishes to be a published writer, use as many other writers for models as he possibly can. The sf com-

munity does not need any more novels about genius children who grow up to get even with their parents and the rest of the world. I would recommend that Mr. Lynch begin his serious reading in the sf field with writers such as Sturgeon, Disch, Dick, Pohl, and Aldiss—if he hasn't already read Clarke, Asimov, Heinlein, Herbert, and Bradbury.

By the way, while we're on the subject of literary controversy, has anyone ever pointed out that Card stole Ursula Le Guin's FTL radio device, the "ansible" (calling it by that very name) from *The Dispossessed* and used it in *Ender's Game*? It seems to me that this is literary plagiarism at its most shameless. Had he called it a "bobo" I could have accepted it; after all, FTL radio communication is very common in sf.

Anyway, I would like to finish with the remark that AMAZING Stories is great. I liked most of the November issue, the Jennings and the Benford stories in the December issue, and "The Sleeping Serpent" by Pamela Sargent in the January issue. Keep up the good work.

Michael L. Loring  
Santa Monica CA

P.S.: In the February 1992 issue of *The Atlantic*, Thomas Disch has a bristling essay on the pitiful state of science fiction. I don't know if I'd agree with all of his points, but he does have a case.

I am currently writing a book about science fiction and war. I would very much like any information anyone might have on the World War II service of Robert Heinlein, who worked at the Philadelphia Naval Yard as a civilian engineer with OPNav-23 on anti-kamikaze defenses among other things. I am also interested in the World War II service of other science fiction writers and editors recruited by Heinlein into the Navy Field Service, especially: Theodore Sturgeon, George O. Smith, John W. Campbell, Jr., Jay

Stanton, Murray Leinster, L. Ron Hubbard, L. Sprague de Camp, and Fletcher Pratt. Thank you.

Chris Hables Gray, Ph. D.  
336 Railroad Ave.  
Ben Lomond CA 95005

I enjoyed the January 1992 issue, but I felt compelled to write by J. Robert King's "Death of a God." The story seemed so real, so terrible, and so moving that it haunted me for days after I read it. The comment in the "About the Authors" department to the effect that Mr. King's training in theology was reflected in the story surprised me, for I saw more mythology than theology.

In any case, the terrible fate of CHRNS-775 was undeserved and should be avenged. Maybe Mr. King will be moved to write "Revolt of the Gods."

Cary Semar  
Dickinson TX

I am an amateur science fiction writer, having written a number of stories for personal pleasure only. I had never considered publication until recently, at the suggestion of a friend. He familiarized me with the current science fiction magazines—a market I thought had disappeared with the golden age.

To my delight, I found that I was gravely wrong, and that my misgivings toward these "modern imitations" were entirely unfounded.

Among the digest-sized pulps, one magazine stood out: AMAZING Stories, whose full size, full color, and glossy pages immediately caught my attention. Congratulations on the new format, it works! I bought the magazine and returned home to pore through it. The January 1992 issue was superb!

Aaron Evans  
Chiloquin OR

# BLADES OF THE DIRAM RING

Barry B. Longyear



TIM HILDEBRANDT

Illustration by Tim Hildebrandt

He entered the Diram Ring early upon the first morning of planting. The pitiless sun was in his face, the long shadows of the ilaya trees slicing the weed-choked sand with purple stripes. He was dark, slender, but not frail. He had swum the moat and was almost naked. His skin was young, smooth, and carried no scars.

Strictly speaking, it was forbidden for him to be there. A few of the Mieura, long ago, had placed themselves against the weight of interplanetary greed and had demanded a treaty that would keep at least the Diram Ring free of humans and their video fraud performers. The document had been signed, many pictures were broadcast, and great windy speeches were made. The Mieura claimed the stone circle to be the last remaining temple of the Mieura that had not been profaned, and the human network negotiators guaranteed that the Diram Ring would never be violated. That was long ago. By the time the dark little human approached the circle, both the Mieura and the humans had allowed the Diram Ring to all but pass from memory.

The creature stood at the western entrance to the ring, his dark eyes examining the interior of what some Mieurans still called a "sacred" ring. Strange it was that the gods who had made the rings their temples so many thousands of years ago were regarded as myths, their appellations useful for nothing but oaths, curses, and the names of automobile models. Strange it was how the Mieura and the humans treated words. "Sacred," not a term of reverence, had become a possessive describing claims to property. "Never" had become a malleable temporal boundary that liquefied at the proper temperature heated by currency-fueled fires. It was sham, all so corrupt—a feasting ground for the Gezi, demons who fed upon guilt and avarice.

Meaning, courage, reverence, and honor were blackened, crumbling artifacts tucked away in a forgotten corner of an antiquities dealer's shop. The gods were dead, everyone presumed, including the gods. No one knew that, when the human came to the ring, the death of the gods was a matter yet to be decided.

The people had grown very small. The blades were no longer the test before the gods. Throwing the blades was now sham sport, attended by the eyes of many worlds, each broadcast contest the object of fool's wagers on prearranged outcomes for profound sums. The blades were no longer prayers. They had become deceitful instruments of profit and entertainment. Few could recall the last throwing where the supplicants weren't hiding from their gods beneath armor. Naked beings beneath the flying blades had become a dim memory of a myth, a poor graphic in an unread school text. The present was filled with the huge ring at Araak and the Diteureh League Championships. Where once the ancient champion of the blades claimed his victory in the name of the gods who so honored him, the modern champion used his victory to claim the defeat of the gods, in addition to obtaining payment for commercial endorsements of demeaning rubbish and slow poisons.

These things were on my mind as the boy human squatted at the edge of the ring and placed his skin-

wrapped brace of blades on the sand. I watched him as my mind was brushed by the memory of Giya, the last of the worthy Mieura to throw blades one hundred and fourteen years before.

The boy human studied the weed-grown wall that encircled the ring. Leaving his blades, he stood and walked toward one of the loose cut stones. His walk carried the grace of a plains runner. It was almost a dance. He squatted to pick up the first stone.

Once there had been a party of stonemasons who had thought to save themselves some work and expense by stealing stones from the walls of the deserted Diram Ring. The stone the boy human lifted had been dropped eighty-one years before by a frightened Mieura mason after I had shown him roaring visions of eternal fire and had marked his hands to keep his visions fresh in his memory. Thirty-one years later, a human technician, his arms loaded with instruments, had crossed the moat to detect and measure plasmodial, biochemical, and electromagnetic fields in the ring. After days of intense work, he could get no readings on his instruments and had left the ring in despair, his mind frantically searching for a new thesis topic. He had muttered to himself that the alien gods, if they ever had existed, were dead now. When I heard him utter those words, I cried.

The boy carried the stone to the wall encircling the ring. First clearing the soil and weeds from the top course of stones, he put the heavy block of stone in place. Then he returned for another block. The original mason's puzzle was almost four thousand years old, and the boy solved it. All of the stones were placed back into their original positions.

When the ring was clear of stones, he began to clear it of sticks and weeds. He was preparing the ring for tossing blades.

I was vaguely puzzled, as if I were coming out of an ancient drugged sleep. I had been in a decades-long meditation and interrupted it only for these questions: Why would a human practice with blades in the crumbled, virtually unknown circle at Diram? The human money interests allowed no humans to compete in the sham contests for fear of having the sport banned from their video networks. Yet why would even a Mieuran come to the Diram Ring? There were no more prayers and no one to which to pray. I watched the boy.

By early afternoon the boy had cleared the sand, bundled the weeds, and removed them. Upon his return, he brought his wrapped blades into the center of the ring, squatted, and opened the skin. He removed from the bundle two gleaming silver double-edged tossing blades, each one as long as his legs, each one sharpened until the ground edges were polished like mirrors. He placed the first blade, handle toward me, on the sand in the center of the ring. The point of the long blade was toward the niche in the ring's wall opposite mine. He lowered the second blade and shoved its point into the sand at his feet near the handle of the first blade. He did it with a practiced, confident manner.

"He would have us notice him," spoke Redgait from the opposite niche.

I was startled at the sound of my brother's voice. It had been decades since I had heard it. "I thought you had deserted the ring," I said to him. "It has been such a long time since I last saw you."

"And I you, Ahnli." There was bitter humor in his voice as he took form, filling the niche with deep orange light the human could not see. Redgait's attention wandered to the creature standing in the center of the ring. "Ahnli, what do you think of this misshapen thing?"

I looked at the boy human. He was respectfully motionless beside his blades, his face toward the east. "He has cleared the ring. It needed to be cleared."

"Leave it to you, my sister, to concern yourself with housekeeping while the universe crumbles."

"The universe is not crumbling, my brother. Change is unchangeable, the stars burn, new stars are born."

Redgait's spindly black form stood out from the drape of his orange haze. "Where are our brothers and sisters? I have wandered every ring on the world. The niches are filled with Gezi demons, video cameras, and spectators with sticky faces as they swallow their poisons and pack their bellies with disgusting goo. The prayers on the sand are now prayers to the Gezi, and the throwers pray not for the test, but for deception, victory, fame, and money. It is all false! A mire of vice. These sham champions of the blades, these exalters of petty demons, now have powers and honors surpassing those of ancient kings. The gods have died and forfeited the Micura to the Gezi, and you say the universe is not crumbling?"

"The gods have not died, brother. I am alive, as are you."

"Bah! Two petty spirits of an unknown ring." The scorn in Redgait's voice did a poor job of veiling his pain.

"Our brothers and sisters are alive too, my brother."

"Alive?"

"They are within me, asleep," I answered.

For once I saw that I had impressed my brother. After a long time he asked, "You hold them? How?"

"I stole them. As each one weakened and quit the Micura in defeat, I wrapped it in love and peace and stole it. The gods didn't die, brother. They did what we did: they quit."

"You have stolen all of the ring gods?"

"All of the gods, Redgait. All but you."

There was a great silence as Redgait fought with his confusion. "Why do you keep them? No one on Micura has any use for gods."

"Unless it's this one," I said, pointing at the human.

"You have taken a great deal upon yourself, sister."

Redgait was silent as he studied the repairs and the cleaning the boy had done. "He has replaced the stones in the wall. He did well. That must have been what brought me back."

I saw my brother's face fill the niche. His confused look turned to one of mischief. He meant to tease me. "I know what you did to the stone cutters, Ahnli. The Micura have written books about it and the humans have even made what you did the subject of one of their silly video plays. In Diram Village they say you are an evil spirit."

"I do not apologize for what I did to the masons."

"I did not ask for an apology. Indeed, why did you let them live?"

"Should I have killed them for disrespecting gods that even the gods abandoned?"

"It is no matter." I had spoiled his game by not getting angry, which had angered Redgait. His orange mist filled the sky as he examined the boy human. "Tell me, Ahnli. Will we guide his blades?" Out of Redgait's mist I could see a spindly arm of black, a dark face of sadness. Redgait had not grown old, for that we could not do. But he had grown bitter and tired. That is age for a god. "Do we guide his blades or drive the splinters of his bones deep into the sand and end it here and now?"

The boy human stood as still as the blade he had thrust into the sand. He knew how to wait. I reminded myself to ask him who had taught him his manners, should we let him live.

"Let us see."

As I drew my energy from the sand and stones, Redgait moved from the north niche and allowed the human to see him as a window that flew through fields of stars. The human did not move. I stepped down from my niche in the wall and came up behind him. "We command and are of the universe. You would have us notice you, small one."

I walked around him as his dark brown eyes remained fixed upon Redgait's window. "Where you now stand is a place reserved for those who give their lives and their deaths to gods that the gods would return life for life, death for death. If you seek fame, wealth, power over others, or the favor of Gezi, you are in the wrong arena. Flee, boy, while you still live." I spoke to the human in high dialect Micuran, the language of the ancient priests and blade throwers. I reached, pulled the upright blade from the sand, and threw it across the other where it rang when it hit like a bell of fine cast silver. They were excellent blades.

"Ahnli, Redgait," said the human. "I place before you my faith. My faith in return is all I ask," he answered in high dialect. Someone had taught him well. Did his heart match his words, however?

"Without acts," said Redgait from his window on the eastern edge of the ring, "your faith is but a word. As you would test the gods, the gods would test you. Let us test each other."

The boy human retrieved the blades, stood upright, and with a practiced throw sent both blades whirling high above the ring, directly over his unprotected head and body.

I froze time to look at my brother. "See? They are perfect throws, Redgait. Unless we intervene, his blades will strike and kill him."

"There is no trick? No plastic tips on the blades, no hidden transmitters allowing the fraud to sneak from beneath his deceitful prayer?" Redgait's thin black arm reached out of the mist, took the blades from the air, turned, and examined them. "These are Giya's. They are his blades."

I took one and examined it myself. They were indeed



the blades that had once brought Giya to faith, then fame and fortune, then fatality. Sadness filled my every corner. I said to my brother, "He could only have gotten these from one of Giya's grandchildren."

"One of his great-grandchildren." Redgait released the blades and we left them whirling in time above the boy human's head, awaiting our decision. "Ril. He had to be the one. The second son of Giya's daughter, Jyn. You remember, Ahnli."

"I remember."

Redgait turned his gaze from the blades and looked through the blue sky at the stars. "It cannot be. Ril must be dead. If he is alive, he must be the oldest Mieuran within memory."

"He was born the same year Giya died," I confirmed.

"Ril was to have been secretly buried with his grandfather's blades. No one but Ril could have supplied these edges, and someone with a lengthy reach to the past schooled the boy human in high dialect and in how to approach the ring."

"For what reason?"

My brother gave a bitter laugh. "To test the gods? To be tested by the gods? Why else in the world would one toss blades without armor?"

I thought upon it for a moment, wondering if the boy human was the form which a daughter's revenge against the gods might take. When Giya's blood soaked into the sand of the Jaffri Ring, Jyn had been there to witness his death. Giya's daughter was not capable of believing her father had an imperfection. Hence she had seen what she thought to be the failure of the gods to shield Giya from the falling blades. Jyn was dead, her spirit part of the hills above Jaffri. The mob had been outraged at Giya's failure, but Giya was dead and could not be hurt by their words or sticks. Instead the mob made Giya's daughter pay for her father. She had been torn to pieces. So long ago.

I held the blades in my hand above the boy's head and crushed them as I released time. The boy stood there for a long moment, waiting for the blades to strike him, or land harmlessly to his sides. When nothing happened, he glanced around, then looked up in horror at the mass of molten silver whirling above his head. It was not fear for his own life that widened his eyes. To his mentor the blades meant the world, and now they were so much liquid.

"Boy, why do you throw in the Diram Ring?" I asked. "There are other places where you could play. Places where they serve beer and where you could preen in front of your kind."

"Ahnli," he said to me, "this is the only ring in the world where the gods still live. That is why I came to the Diram Ring."

The voice was strong, strange, yet touched with the familiar. "What are you called?" I asked.

"Alan."

"Alan," I said, "we will keep the blades here, above the ring. Go and bring us your teacher."

After a moment's hesitation, Alan turned until the sun was in his eyes, and walked from the ring. As the sun's

orb touched the western horizon, Redgait asked, "Do you believe he will return?"

I watched a horned spider begin its new nest between the stones Alan had placed upon the wall of the Diram Ring. Above, in the sky, were the trails of cargo and passenger ships. On another world a child prayed. "Yes," I answered. "He will return."

"And we will wait for him?"

"We will wait."

"In which case, my sister, we are both fools."

The next day, just as the morning sunlight touched the molten metal above the Diram Ring, Ril, the ancient grandson of the great Giya, came before us. His wrinkled skin was the color and texture of rotted leather. His human, Alan, stood at the opening in the west wall. They had come over the moat upon a raft. Ril was too old to swim. Indeed, he was too old to be alive.

The hairless old Mieuran, his rheumy black eyes looking in dismay at the remains of his father's precious blades, held out his pitifully thin arms and called, "Ahnli! Redgait! Spirits of the Diram Ring, can you have given over this arena to the Gezi demons, as well? Is there no ring left in the world where gods rule?"

Ril stood directly beneath the whirling globule of metal and turned his face up toward it. In the light reflected from the metal I saw how timeworn Ril was. Redgait and I could never grow old, which is why we always felt terribly ancient.

"You speak as a child," scolded my brother. "Why did you send the human?" Redgait filled the sky with fire.

Ril lowered his arms and looked first at the northern niche, then turned and stared at me, an expression of astonishment on his face. "Can it be that the gods do not know what has happened to the world? Ahnli," he cried, his shaking hands extended toward the south niche. "Ahnli, look upon the world. Your people are starving without their gods."

"I see them," I answered as I let myself appear to the old Mieuran. To him I appeared as a Mieuran female. "They do not seem hungry to me. They dance to the Gezi's tune and grow fat and sleek."

Ril lowered his arms, a hint of anger edging into his voice. "Play me not the fool, Ahnli. You know the starvation of which I speak. The light within each of them grows more dim with each passing moment. It is a hunger of the soul."

"Why the human?" interrupted Redgait.

Old Ril whirled around and snapped at the north, "No Mieuran could have awakened you! You curl in your niches wallowing in self-pity while your world dies the death of the spirit. How else were you to be driven from your cowardly hiding places?"

A great red hand, the palm of which could cover the ring, reached up from the north niche to crush the old Mieuran. My own hand reached up and held Redgait's until my brother's temper cooled.

"The balance!" cried Ril as he held his hands up toward the clasped hands of Redgait and myself. "The balance! It is for this that the world starves." He turned



slowly and looked upon his dark little human. "Alan believes in gods. That is why he is here. I believe in those who believe. That is why I trained him and brought him to the Diram Ring. I must see my grandfather's blades thrown in the consecration once more. I must see the gods live."

Far above the ring, away from the ears of Ril and his human, I spoke to Redgait. "Where from here, brother? Do we crush them and retire to the peace of our ring?"

With his hand, Redgait touched the molten metal above the ring, fashioning them again into Giya's sacred blades. He took them and drove them toward Ril's upturned head. I and he guided them apart. They both stuck into the sand. Ril reached out his hands, grasped the handles, pulled the blades from the sand, and held them out toward the human.

Alan took the blades. As Ril retired to the edge of the ring, the human stood at the eastern edge, tossed the blades into the air above the center of the ring, and ran beneath them to the opposite side. Both blades struck vertically into Alan's footprints.

"Excellent!" exclaimed my brother, but in a voice only I could hear.

"He is swift and his throw is accurate," I admitted. "It is different, though, with eight, sixteen, or sixty throwers mixing their blades. He knows where his blades will strike. He cannot predict the others."

"For that, Ahnli, he has the gods."

I watched Alan retrieve the blades and throw them again. This time they landed in his path directly in front of him as he reached the far side of the ring. Without a pause he took the blades, touched the edge of the ring with his foot, and threw again, this time catching them by the handles as he reached the opposite side. He was far better than Giya had been. Swift, accurate, graceful, and he had a certain style that said, "Witness my passage. The gods protect me."

That had been the purpose of the rings and the passage through the blades. It was to bear witness that the gods were there, that they were strong, and that they helped those who sought them. Advertising, a human might have called it.

Redgait and I could protect Alan in the Diram Ring. For Alan to throw in another ring, however, he would need the gods of that ring. As the boy continued to throw, proving his stamina as well, I came before Ril and asked, "Where would you have him throw?"

"The ring at Jaffri."

"Where the gods killed your grandfather."

"No. Where my grandfather placed his faith in a paper god who could not protect him. There is where the end of the world began: the end of the blade throwers, the end of the gods, the end of faith."

I stared in wonder at Ril. Had he spent his many years searching for the proper champion to correct the long-forgotten wrongs of his grandfather? Did he think he and his dark little human could alter the direction of the world? Did he think he could replace guile with courage, money with honor, sham with faith? The decision wasn't mine. Ril would begin his quest in the Jaffri

Ring, hence the decisions that needed to be made belonging to other gods.

Lok and Diru were the gods of the Jaffri Ring, and they were still fast asleep deep inside me where I had hidden them. I reached out far beneath the eastern horizon with my sight and looked down upon the great metropolis of Jaffri beneath the morning sun. In the center of the city stood the ancient walls and columns of the Jaffri Ring. The ring itself was identical to the one at Diram, but instead of hundreds, the stands above and beyond the walls at the Jaffri Ring could seat hundreds of thousands.

On the sand the armored contestants warmed up and played with their blades, practicing their movements and falls, keeping fit and honing their routines for the performance that afternoon. It would be a performance, too. Deaths in the rings, although far from rare, were suspected to be faked. The truth was worse than that. The deaths were newcomers to the rings, inadequately trained fools with their eyes on fame, whom the veterans aimed at when they tossed their blades above the ring. It was an unspoken and unwritten rule among the veterans: spare the guild and aim at the beginners. The newcomers got a split-second of glory, the veterans got their prize money and commercial endorsements, and there was plenty of gore on the sand for the viewers at home. Something for everyone, as one disgusted human news commentator put it.

Instead of gods, in the niches of the Jaffri Ring there were bored video crews arranging their cameras and patching their signals for the afternoon's sportscast. Dark smudges of movement behind them spoke of the Gezi demons and their numbers. The filthy creatures were thick in the Jaffri Ring. Only gods could see them, but the humans and phony blade throwers knew they were there, if only in their hearts. Gezi feed on fraud and greed, and not one of them was growing slim in the Jaffri Ring.

I brought Lok and Diru up. They opened their eyes, looked at their temple, and wept at what they saw below. "Sister," cried Diru. "Why did you steal me? Why have you awakened me? To witness this?" Her fire flashed out above the Jaffri Ring. The blade throwers and video technicians below stopped what they were doing and looked up at the sky.

"That?"

"Did you see?"

"What was it?"

"It's gone now."

"What was it?"

A shrug, a head shaking, a coach clapping his hands for attention, a sharp word from a camera's crew chief. Without the flames of their god's despair singeing their brows every moment, the contestants returned to practicing their scripts and the video technicians returned to preparing their equipment. One human, however, leaned upon a camera and continued to stare at the sky. He was someone with a bit of authority and was not barked into action right away.

"See that, Diru," I commanded. "With the mere flick

of your finger you commanded the attention of the entire ring. The human in the south niche, the one with the red hair, is looking for you still. Shall he find you?"

"I who slew Giya and crushed the faith of a world?" Diru held out her hands and blackened the sky for me.

I saw the Jaffri Ring as it was more than a century ago, the Mieuran blade throwers naked before their gods, the humans in the stands gaping at the strange novelty of the tossing. The great Giya strode into the center of the ring. Although he had tossed his white flowers at the southern niche and his blue flowers before Lok at the north, his manner did not witness the balance and protection of the gods. Instead his bearing seemed to say, "Look you at me. See me. See Giya. Celebrate my immortality."

He came to a halt, bowed toward the north, bowed toward the south, and made one additional bow, the first such ever seen in a ring. He bowed toward the west where a lone video camera, the first ever allowed into a ring, was mounted.

Diru saw into Giya's heart and was horrified. Giya had been offered an incredible ransom for that bow, and for future appearances on the television. Everything in the universe had been granted him when, only days before, the single thing Giya had desired was to be one with his gods and bear witness to that union with his blades on the sand.

Diru's attention was focused on her own dismay. Giya tossed the blades high above his head, and they did not whirl in the air for him. Instead Lok brought them down before Diru realized that they had even been thrown.

Giya had been the greatest. The throws were perfect. The points of both blades entered his skull, killing him instantly. His was the kindest of many deaths. At the same moment he died, faith died. The heart of a race grew suddenly barren.

The blade throwers who followed Giya that day, individuals and teams, were shaken. There had been no balance. All had seen it. Giya's faith had been corrupted and there had been no balance. If the great Giya's faith had been inadequate to balance the gods, whose could be sufficient? Those who had viewed the event on their new televisions asked the same question.

That day more than forty throwers died in the ring before the wardens called off the competitions. Competitions in other rings around the world were also called off when similar numbers of throwers fell. The rings were closed for many days while Mieuran politicians and human network officials made talk. When the rings opened once again, there was armor on the throwers. Soon came the video cameras, promoters, and concessionaires. The Gezi became bloated.

"This we have done to the world," said Diru solemnly. "This we cannot undo."

Lok was staring down at the Jaffri Ring as the image of the old ring faded and was replaced by the present ring with its cameras, lights, armored competitors, and hordes of fat little Gezi. There were video screens around the inside wall of the ring advertising new gods: athletes, fashions, cosmetics, investments, foods, and medicines. Lok faced his sister and said, "Diru, there is a

weightier sin than Giya's lack of faith in us. It is our lack of faith in ourselves." He turned toward me. "Ahnli, do you have a thrower?"

I brought them to the Diram Ring, where Alan was doing his drills beneath the watchful eye of Giya's grandson. "A human," Lok stated.

"Watch him well," I said. "He is better even than Giya."

"He is a human," said Diru. "If Giya's head could be turned by the humans, what of him?"

Redgait grinned from his niche and said, "Diru, although they are exceptionally good at it, humans did not invent greed. They are capable of the choosing."

"Show me," Diru commanded. "Show me the consecration."

"Ril," I called to the old Mieuran. Alan halted his drills and stood silently at the edge of the ring as Ril approached the south niche. When he was in front of Diru, Lok, and myself, I said to him, "Present with me are the gods of the Jaffri Ring."

"I honor them," said Ril as he bowed deeply.

"Even though they killed your grandfather?"

"Diru knows," said the old Mieuran, "that Giya's greed killed him, not the gods of the ring."

I studied Diru's face to see if what Ril said would ease her burden. I could see nothing in her face. Instead she simply repeated, "Show me the consecration."

"Diru and Lok would see the consecration," I said to Ril. The old Mieuran turned, placed one hand atop another, and held them out toward Alan.

The human approached the center of the ring, crossed the blades and placed them on the sand in the center of the ring. He had no flowers to offer. Nevertheless he bowed toward Redgait and then bowed toward me. Taking the blades in hand, he threw them up directly over his head. Redgait grabbed the blades from the air and drove them down toward Alan's skull. I reached between the blades and pushed them aside. As though they were describing the arc of a perfect bell, the blades stuck into the sand on either side of the boy.

Diru nodded once and said, "Very well, Ahnli. Bring him to the Jaffri Ring. Lok and I will look into the human's soul to see if it remains pure." She turned her face toward me and said, "Faith is easier in the Diram Ring, sister. There are fewer distractions. Here the Gezi would starve. It is different outside these walls." And then they vanished.

I appeared to Ril and said, "The gods of the Jaffri Ring have agreed to stand at the niches when Alan appears there. How will you get him on the sand? Humans are forbidden."

The old Mieuran held up a bony finger and said, "Forgive me, Ahnli, but they are not forbidden. Forbidding someone on the basis of race the great law of the many worlds does not allow. Humans killed in the rings, however, might raise viewer protests and risk the loss of vast fortunes; fortunes that are safe for as long as the dying is done only by the Mieura."

"If they cannot be barred, why do no humans throw the blades? They have no shortage of actors, frauds, or murderers."

"Ahnli, the current rules, as put down by the Diteureh League trustees, state that the armor worn by a competitor must be of a certain size and design and that no other kind or size of armor is allowed. This effectively bars humans since their heads and shoulders are larger than the Mieuran. It does not specifically forbid, however, a competitor who chooses to throw the blades without armor." He issued a wicked grin. "The humans made up the rules and enforce them through the fortunes they command. We only abide by them."

A universe of possibilities opened before me. "When will you enter him?"

"I will enter him in the lists tonight. He will throw the blades in the Jaffri Ring tomorrow afternoon." He held out his open palms and bowed toward me. "My eternal gratitude for your assistance, Ahnli." He faced the north and bowed again. "My eternal thanks for your assistance, Redgait."

The boy human withdrew the blades from the sand, crossed them over his chest and bowed to each of us, respectfully thanking us for his life and the manner in which we honored him as demonstrated by his continued existence.

When the ring was again empty, Redgait withdrew into his niche and entered into deep meditation. I looked within myself and called up all of my brothers and sisters, not only of the many rings, but those of the land, skies, winds, and waters, gods of stars, gods of life and love, I had hidden them long enough. Tomorrow would see us all reborn or, perhaps, dead.

Gongs and chimes, somewhat reminiscent of the ancient sounds, began the opening ceremonies at the Jaffri Ring. Even though the music incorporated human instruments and cadences, few paid the sounds any attention. The gods arranged themselves among the spectators around the ring while Lok and Diru took their places in the north and south niches, uncomfortably sharing their spaces with humans, Mieurans, cameras, and Gezi. I joined Diru in the south niche, and there the redheaded human from the day before was observing on a monitor while a human and a Mieuran talked before the camera.

The human was introduced as sportscaster Del Nolan. He was a used-up sports entertainment commentator. His employers had dumped him in Mieuran blade throwing until his contract expired. The Mieuran was introduced as Ti Edge, his humanized name a concession to viewing audiences around the many worlds. He was a retired blade thrower, and he and the human seemed to talk knowingly about the day's competitors. Their forced interest and manufactured enthusiasm as they speculated upon the day's prearranged outcomes made me wonder at the kinds of beings who had so little of life that they felt they could improve it by watching Mieuran blade throwing.

The redheaded human was wearing a headset, and with his hand he signaled the two conversationalists as he spoke into his headset. Suddenly a new face appeared on the monitor. It was a human female with black hair and skin the color of pale sand. She had been

considered beautiful once, but her increasing number of wrinkles and a voice growing shrill had numbered her days before the camera. She too had reached the bottom rung of her profession. Standing next to her was Ril. In the background was Alan. He was wearing the traditional robe of pale blue, symbolizing the balance between north and south, balance between white and midnight blue. Giya's blades were slung on his back.

"To get around the rules excluding humans, Ril, you plan to send your boy in without any armor at all? Is that correct?"

"No," answered Giya's grandson. "That is not correct. Alan is entering the ring without armor because he needs no armor."

"Alan is pretty nimble, is he?"

Ril looked at the sportscaster and said, "When the gods are balanced, one needs neither armor nor agility."

"Gods?" For a moment the human female smirked and mugged at the camera as though only she and billions of viewers were in on an immense joke that the old Mieuran didn't understand. "Of course. Can you tell us anything about Alan—is that his full name?"

"Alan is his name. He is a novice blade thrower. This is his first competition."

A shred of genuine concern entered the woman's voice. "You are aware that the life expectancy of an armored beginner is perhaps a second or two after the first throw? Alan will be going in bare, and those aren't rubber blades."

This time it was Ril's turn to smirk. "I am aware that the gods direct the blades today."

She laughed in exasperation. "But what if they don't?" "They do."

"How do you know that? Are you willing to throw away a human life because of some ancient superstition? What if you're wrong? I ask you again, how do you know these gods will protect your boy?"

"I've seen Alan do the consecration in the Diram Ring. I have seen the gods in balance."

She frowned at the unknown name, and then a signal came to her headset from the redheaded man. "Well, good luck to you and to Alan. I'm certain everyone back home is rooting for him." The female human faced her camera and said, "There you have it. Ril, the trainer for Alan the mystery man, the first human ever to enter the lists. You have to admire this kid's guts, if not his brains. Ti?"

Another face appeared on the monitor; it was the retired Mieuran blade thrower, Ti Edge. "Thanks, Michi. I take it the difficulties with the Jaffri Ring trustees and the league trustees are all settled."

Back to Michi. "Yes, Ti. The rules are pretty clear. In fact the rules had to be bent considerably a century ago to allow the competitors to wear armor. It seems as long as the mystery man appears without armor, he's entitled to a place on the sand."

There was talk, endless talk, about possible appeals, who Alan might be, who Ril might be, and even who the gods might be. The chatter continued until the prospect of an afterlife seemed boring, the music ceased, and the

blade throwers entered the ring. To the raucous sounds of ribbed horns, they came through the western gate and continued around the circumference until there was a circle of sixty-eight throwers. All save Alan wore armor.

The different suits of armor were of many colors. Veterans wore dark and sand colors while the newcomers were clad in bright pinks, oranges, and reds. It was part of the guild regulations, thereby making better targets of the newcomers. Anyone who lasted through a number of competitions was eventually entitled to a more camouflaged suit of plates.

Alan, seemingly tiny in his nakedness, was almost directly opposite the south niche when what the television people called the consecration began.

In the case of the armored lumps surrounding the ring, the consecrations were blade tossing exercises, seeing how close one could come to oneself without actually drawing blood. Most of the veterans were very good at it, but the audience considered the consecrations little more than boring warming-up exercises.

I turned and saw the red-haired man. He was issuing instructions to the man on the camera, and the lens swept the faces in the ring below while Ti Edge and his human swapped comments about the contenders. Gezi demons were all about, but they didn't hang off the red-haired human the way they did the others. I crept into the man's mind and found his name: Tomas Holly. In his heart I found desperate, numbing loneliness. In his soul I found the bitter hole that remains after the death of a child's god. He was every bit as crippled as the people of Mieuira, and for the same reasons.

I moved back into his mind and planted there a thought. "Renny," he said to the cameraman, "frame the human and keep on him."

"Are you kidding?" said the man on the camera, although he immediately focused on Alan. "He's nobody, a pat, a suicide. Who cares?"

"I care."

"Yeah, but you aren't the one selling the jock itch spray and yeast infection ointment."

"Just stay on him."

"Got it."

I withdrew from the human and looked at Diru. The goddess of Jaffri's south niche was concentrating on Alan, as was Lok from the opposite side of the ring. Neither one of the Jaffri Ring gods was doing well against the desecration of their niches. I asked them them an ancient question: "Diru, Lok, you have the power. Why do you not sweep the trespassers and demons into the ring?"

"The test of the gods," replied Diru, "is not to show if they can destroy. All beings can destroy."

"It is to witness," continued Lok, "that the gods love, assist, and protect those who seek the balance." A human climbed upon Lok's seemingly vacant pedestal for a better view, and the god of the north niche bumped the creature off the stand and onto his posterior. The human's face looked shocked for a moment, then puzzled, then embarrassed that someone else might have seen him fall. A god had just touched him, and his main

concern was how it might appear to others. The universe was crippled indeed.

Tomas Holly, the assistant director with the hole in his soul, had witnessed the event. His brow wrinkled, he walked to the pedestal centered in the southern niche. It was cracked and split in several places, which is why no one had attempted to site a camera there or use it for an observation platform. It came up to the human's waist. He lifted his arm and gingerly reached into the space above the crumbling slab of granite.

His fingers seemed to touch something; the something was Diru, and the god of the south niche took it for several moments before she gifted the human with a spark that caused him to withdraw his hand in haste. His frown became deeper.

The stands grew suddenly silent, and Tomas Holly faced the ring to see the cause. Alan was walking toward the center of the ring.

"This is an unexpected turn," said Ti Edge's voice from the monitor. "Alan, the mystery man, is entering the center of the ring. 'It's almost—'"

"Are those flowers he's holding, Ti?" interrupted Del Nolan.

"Yes, Del. White and blue flowers. I don't believe it, but—yes. He's offering the white flowers to the south niche and the blue to the north. To the gods of those niches. He's going to do the traditional consecration; something this ring hasn't seen in over a century!"

"You mean like we talked about in the history segment? That's insane," said Del Nolan, a genuine note of feeling and concern in his voice. "Michi," he said, "are you watching this?"

"Yes, Del." And that was all she said.

Alan crossed his blades, placed them in the exact center of the ring, stood, bowed toward Lok, and then bowed toward Diru. He picked up the blades, and in one fluid motion threw them high into the air directly above him. The ring fell as silent as death. Lok reached out with his powerful hands, grabbed the blades, and drove them down toward Alan's skull. Diru intervened, and again the bell-shaped arc of the blades testified to the balance of the gods.

The stunned crowd exploded with cheers while Michi, Ti, and Del examined instant playbacks from several different angles. The sportscasters offered interpretations to explain the event that had just taken place. Del Nolan spoke of wooden blades called boomerangs that could be thrown by an experienced hand to follow any path the thrower wished. Michi speculated about computer-generated images, although she had watched Alan, not one of the monitors. Ti Edge was strangely silent.

Tomas Holly punched a button on his control panel, cutting off the audio signal, and spoke into his headset. "Ti. What was that?"

The Mieurian sportscaster looked around the camera, his eyes dazed. "I don't know, Tomas. If it was a trick, I cannot see how it was done. Perhaps it was real."

"If it was?"

The Mieurian shook his head in a very human gesture. "It couldn't be, Tomas."

"If it was?" he repeated.

"Then the niches are filled with gods, they are in balance, they controlled the fall of Alan's blades, and will protect him in the ring." He waved his hands about, encompassing the south niche, the ring, the world, and the known universe. "And all of this—you, me—all is sham."

The events that took place in the Jaffri Ring that day became legend. As the sixty-eight competitors made their first throws, fully a third of the blades were tossed along Alan's path. Although eleven novices were taken dead or wounded from the ring after the first throw, not an edge had touched Alan. There was very little sports commentary, although the instant playbacks were run at varying speeds, filling the time until the next throw.

In another throw the remaining nine Mieuran novices were eliminated, along with four veterans who had taken paths too close to the human's. And that during a throw in which two-thirds of the blades fell along Alan's path.

"Burning bush," muttered Tomas Holly. He blinked and glanced at the pedestal where he had touched a god. "The consecration, the blades, the rings, the whole damned sport." He looked back at Alan, back at the ring, where another throw was about to commence. Instead of cheering and jeering, as was their custom, the crowd in the stands had been awed into silence, as had been their custom centuries before.

The glittering throwing knives arced above the ring, the competitors raced onto the sand, and Alan halted in the center and extended his hands up to catch Giya's blades. A cloud of knives fell about him, stuck into the sand, and he simply stood there in that forest of sharpened steel, unharmed, holding his own blades high above his head.

A low moaning came from the stands, and I saw that many of the spectators were bent over with their faces covered, while others stared wide-eyed at Alan. The trustees called off the competition, and the blade tossers, spectators, and television people went to their respective homes contemplating matters upon which they never expected to think.

"It is begun," I said to Redgait after we had returned to the Diram Ring. "There are gods again above the sand at Jaffri. Our brothers and sisters go to reclaim all of the rings, the seasons, the elements, the stars."

It was dark and Redgait stood until his face was among the stars. "All the gods are in their places, Ahnli. You have awakened them all."

"I awakened them," I said. "Alan gave them life. Alan gave life to the many worlds."

"When Alan becomes corrupted and the blades take him, do we fade again? I already see packs of agents, promoters, and lawyers below, their hands filled with offers, their mouths filled with lies, searching for Alan. There is a renewal in the efforts to develop armor that looks like a naked body from a distance—" He paused for a moment, then came his voice, low and puzzled. "Ahnli, my sister, we have more visitors at the Diram Ring."

We came down from the stars and occupied our niches as we watched the western entrance. Two figures crossed the moat upon a raft. Their hands held lights that danced in the darkness. I looked closely, and saw that it was Ti Edge and the human, Tomas Holly. The raft struck the bank, and the human held the raft against it while the Mieuran climbed up the bank. Then the Mieuran held the rope while the human climbed the bank. At last they stood in the entrance to the ring. I could see that Ti Edge had a long leather case slung upon his back. The retired Mieuran fraud had brought his blades.

Tomas Holly played his light around the interior of the arena. "Someone's been here," he said. "It's deserted now."

"Deserted?" the Mieuran growled. "Did the Jaffri Ring teach you nothing?"

"I meant I don't see anyone. Are you sure this is the place?"

"This is the place. There is only one Diram Ring."

"Maybe you heard it wrong on the playback. It might have been something that sounded like that."

Ti spoke very clearly. "This is the place."

After an uncomfortable pause, the human walked until he came to the center of the ring. Once there he stopped, examined the sand at his feet, then played his light along the walls, stopping first upon my niche, and then upon Redgait's. Raising the level of his beam above the wall, he let the light play among the stands, crumbling and overgrown with *ilaya* trees and great clumps of saw-toothed *fina* grass.

He turned off his light and said out loud, "Our researchers managed to find out the names of the niche spirits of the Jaffri Ring. Diru and Lok. They will not speak with us. Or is it that they cannot speak with us?" He waited for a long moment. I could see Redgait silently quaking with laughter.

"My sister," he said at last. "They have come to put us on the television."

Redgait never was one for looking into someone's heart. I looked into Ti Edge's heart and read what was there. I looked into Tomas Holly's heart and read what was there. Their superiors in the television company had sent them to put "whatever these beings are" on the television, but that was not why they were in the Diram Ring. Each one had his own reason.

I cupped my hand above the ring and flooded it with a dome of light. The Mieuran stopped breathing and the human dropped his lighting device. I appeared to them as a mist and said to the human, "Gods have souls, Tomas Holly. I would not let you steal mine."

The human withdrew an instrument from his pocket and looked at it. "It doesn't show anything," he muttered. Looking up from his instrument he said to me, "It doesn't show anything. If you are real, and you are what you say you are, show yourselves."

I could feel the heat of anger coming from the north niche as Redgait appeared as a column of molten metal. "The proof was in the consecration at the Jaffri Ring, human. The proof was in the life of Alan."

Tomas Holly pressed a button on his instrument and listened. "No audio, no fields, no nothin'."

Redgait's spidery black arm reached into the night sky, and the instrument in the human's hands began smoking. Tomas dropped it and watched as the thing melted, burst into flames, and burned away, leaving the sand as clean as Alan had left it. "Now your instrument showed something," sneered Redgait. "And even that is not sufficient evidence to one who begins his search by assuming the object of his quest does not exist."

Redgait circled the ring with fire, turned the sand to water, and sent the two creatures to undersea worlds filled with great beauties and equally great horrors. After a moment of this, I saw a shadow of sadness and despair cross my brother's face. "This is childish of me, Ahnli. Why do you let me go on so?"

"We must have faith in them, my brother. It is no less than what we ask of them."

"To have faith in them is almost beyond my powers."

I brought up the creatures and brought the Diram Ring back to the dark, dusty ruin it had been for over a century. As Ti Edge and Tomas Holly gasped on the sand, I said to my brother, "It is perhaps even more difficult for them to have faith in us."

After a long silence, broken only by the coughing and breathing of the Mieuran and the human, Tomas Holly struggled into a sitting position and said, "Alan has disappeared. No one can find him. The Mieuran who registered as his manager is dead. According to the local records, he's been dead for years. The offers that are waiting for Alan are too incredible to be believed. If you know where he is you have a responsibility to him to tell me."

"Ril is dead?" Redgait asked me, allowing the pair on the sand to hear him.

I looked. "Yes, brother. For many years now."

"There is another among us, then, my sister."

"Yes."

"Another what?" demanded Tomas Holly as he got to his feet. "Another what?"

I filled the ring with pale blue light as I took human form and faced the man with the red hair. "What you want most in the universe, Tomas Holly, is the thing you cannot trust yourself to believe."

"There is another what?" he demanded.

Redgait took human shape and stood beside me. "Another god," he answered.

"God? Gods?" The human shook his head and held out his hands. "Is this a word that represents a pantheon of supernatural creatures, supreme beings, or perhaps only a race that exists in some part on another plane of existence? Just another race?"

"Yes," I answered. "And much more and much less."

The battle that waged behind Tomas Holly's eyes reached a climax, then his face grew grim, his gaze cast downward. He did not look up as he said, "Where's Alan?"

"Wherever you need him," I answered.

"I need him in Araak within the next few days to sign with my network. That's where I need him."

"No, Tomas." I reached out my hand, entered his chest, and put my hand into that great hole that was his soul. "Here is where you need him. Humans have gods, too. Alan is a human god." I withdrew my hand as the human gaped at me.

"Alan is a god?"

"Search for him, Tomas. It may take the rest of your days, but you will find him."

I faced the Mieuran, Ti Edge. He was still seated upon the sand, his gaudy clothing soaked. As he looked at me I altered my shape to fit his eyes. "Here I am, Tija," I said, using his given name.

He looked down at my feet, his face cast in shame. "For my lifetime, goddess, I have desecrated your temple, used it for fraud, sold its pieces to strangers, and brought murder to its sands. I scorned you, laughed at your legend, ridiculed those who believed. I failed you, for I had no faith."

"We failed you for the same reason, Tija. We made a blade tosser our god, and when we saw he was not perfect, we turned our backs on the universe. Can we forgive each other?"

He was silent for a moment, then I saw his heart make its decision. He stood, walked to the eastern edge of the ring, dropped his case, and began removing his clothes. When he at last stood naked before the ring, he opened his case and withdrew a set of dull black blades, colored that way to make them more difficult to see when tossed into the path of a novice. In the handles were tiny transmitters to help the thrower in locating and dodging them. Tija removed the transmitters, tucked the blades beneath his arm, and reached once more into his case. When he withdrew his hand it held two bunches of flowers: white and blue.

"Ti," said Tomas Holly, "do you know what you're doing?"

"Do *you* know what he is doing?" asked Redgait of the human.

Tomas Holly walked to the western entrance, stood at the edge of the ring, and turned around so that he was facing Tija. Again I looked into his heart. His pain was such that, for the first time in his life, perhaps, he could listen. As Tija crossed his blades and placed them on the sand, I said to the human, "Begin with a small god, Tomas. As you grow, so too will your god."

The white flowers were offered to the south niche, and I took my place. The blue flowers were offered to the north niche, and Redgait was there to accept them. Tija faced the western entrance, picked up his blades, and paused as his gaze met the human's and a flock of doubts flew through him. The moment passed and the doubts vanished like the desert mist beneath the eye of the sun. Up went the blackened blades, high above the sand. Tija's hands were practiced, and the throws were perfect. Redgait took the blades in hand and drove their points down toward Tija's skull. I parted them and the human witnessed the bell-shaped arc described by the blades.

Alan was only a small god. We began with him. ♦



# Going to Texas (Extradition Version)

Joe Clifford Faust

The guard was nervous as I checked my gun through onto the airplane. I'd shown him my badge and credentials, but holding the lump of metal in his hand clearly made him nervous.

You should be grateful, I thought, that I'm on this flight. I'm not stupid, I've been trained how to use that thing. And if someone shouting "Jihad!" stands up in the cabin, I'm not going to fill it with twenty flying 9mm projectiles in less than three seconds. I've been trained. I'll know what to do.

Still, the guard was uneasy as he pulled the clip to check the parallel loads, then jammed it



Illustration by Robert Morrissey

back in, gingerly handing it to me with two fingers, like it was some sort of contaminant.

I wondered if he'd had Insight.

I dreamed about Manny on the flight down to Dallas. It was an honest dream, unenhanced, no echoes or smacks of Insight. We were driving down Gratiot Boulevard when we saw the Pig Sisters trying to do some john right in the middle of the street. But when we flicked on the lights and pulled up to the car, we saw it wasn't really the Pig Sisters.

It was the runaways.

And the john wasn't a john, but was the girl's father.

And suddenly Manny looked like Boris Karloff as the mummy, eyes swollen shut and wrapped head-to-toe in decaying bandages.

Dallas/Fort Worth airport was insane. The aisles were crowded with servicemen, indigents, and security personnel. The smell was worse than any airport I had ever been in, from heat, from the crowds, from the dozens of kiosks selling ethnic foods from every corner of the world and cooking it right there while you watched.

I felt something swipe across my left buttock and pivoted fast, hand darting under my coat, bumping where my wallet really was and grabbing the handle of my Smith and Wesson. I don't know if I would have drawn and fired in that crowded a place, but it was nice to know I had the reflex.

It was no matter. I was staring into the dark eyes of a dirty little boy with bad teeth and a straightblade in his hand. The sight caused me to freeze for a moment. Suppose I had drawn? Suppose I had actually fired? The end result would surely be ironic—me being trited under the very act that I had come to Texas to uphold.

The boy started to inch away from me. I stopped him by growling, "What are you doing?" in my best bad-cop voice.

He dropped the blade. "*Lo siento, señor*, but there was . . . I was just . . ."

I patted my back pocket with my left hand. I had made a clean slit right across the bottom of the pocket. Had I carried my wallet there, he would have had it and been long gone.

"Go!" I said through clenched teeth. I pulled my gun out enough to give him a glimpse of the handle, and he turned and vanished into the crowd.

I let the weapon fall back into the shoulder holster and sighed in relief. When I left they had warned me that going through the DFW terminal would be like scaling one of the lower levels of hell itself, and if I got through unscathed, it would be nothing short of a miracle. Everything happened at DFW. Everything and too much of it.

I went into the men's room to urinate. As I was finishing, something hard poked into my back and I felt hot breath on my neck.

"The wallet," said a thin voice. "Gimme it. Now."

"You're too late," I laughed. "Some little kid—"

He pushed me into the wall. I heard a click.

"All right. You've convinced me. Take it."

"You get it for me. No tricks either, cowboy."

If that was the way he wanted it. I slowly put my hand under my jacket and grabbed my gun.

"Hurry it up!" he shouted.

"If you insist." I spun hard, throwing my arm out and letting the weight of the weapon carry me. The barrel caught my assailant in the temple and raked across his cheek. He spilled back onto the floor, something small and black spinning away from him, and when he looked up, he saw the twin barrels of the 9mm staring right back at him.

"Give me a reason!" I shouted, cocking the hammer.

"Do it! Give me a reason!"

With blood pouring out of the gash on his face, he scrambled out the door on all fours. I wiped off the barrel of my gun, then retrieved the object he had dropped.

It was a gun, a hardpoint plastic model. It was inaccurate and only good for about a dozen shots, but still lethal at point blank range. I flushed the three rounds down a toilet and crushed the gun under my heel, throwing the bigger pieces away.

They were right. Everything, and too much of it.

From Dallas I had to catch a puddle-jumper flight into Temple on one of those rickety, pre-terrorist death traps. It was bad, but I was glad to be out of DFW. I still didn't relish the thought of being on this plane, so I pulled the bottle of Insight out of my pocket, measured out three pills—enough for thirty minutes—and slipped the tabs under my tongue. Bitterness welled up in the back of my throat as the warning to get ready. My mouth puckered from the sensation. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

Manny.

This time he'd never made it into law enforcement. He washed out of the Marines when he yielded to temptation and slugged the DI who had singled him out for torment. Manny had told me the story many times before. The DI was right in his face, shouting and spitting and slobbering. Manny knew that this was it, the point of no return, make or break.

He closed his eyes and let the man yell.

Only this time he didn't close his eyes. He slugged the DI, breaking his nose. Then Manny slugged him again, shattering the orbital of his left eye. The other recruits had to pull Manny away.

They court-martialed Manny. He was a wreck. The one chance he had to turn his life around, and it was gone.

He drifted into drugs. Selling. Then using.

They found him dead of an overdose. They were never sure if it was accidental, intentional, or inflicted by someone else. It could have gone any one of those ways, and it had been known that he'd incurred the wrath of his supplier by shooting all of the profits into his arm.

Dead at twenty-three.

He never had a chance.

I was disappointed that the Texas cop who met me at the airport wasn't one of those classic redneck types that you always hear about. He was a rather handsome His-

panic man of sergeant's rank named Rico. I was grateful for the ride because the Insight had given me a thick greeling head and gluey eyes. Rico smiled pleasantly and greeted me with a firm handshake that I had to work to return.

"So," he said with a smile, after we had introduced ourselves, "you're here to take the young lovers home."

"Yeah," I said, wiping sticky matter from the corners of my eyes. "Touching, isn't it? Young love."

"Makes me sick," said Rico.

I shrugged. "You can't blame them for trying. The boy's father is a skaghead. The kid was just trying to get away to something better."

Rico laughed. "Some improvement. He took a young nubile across a couple of state lines, now he's looking at a stretch in the Men's Club, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars."

I shook my head as we boarded the escalator to baggage claim. "He should be so lucky."

Rico cocked his head at me.

"There's always something that makes the extradition stink," I continued. "In this case it's the fathers. His wouldn't give a damn if the kid never showed up again—"

"And hers is asking for the kid's gonads on a stick, I suppose."

"Hers has filed for prosecution under the Mihaljevic Act."

Rico looked away and shook his head. "Not for something like this."

"He's adamant. Of course, there's the possibility of finding a judge who is generous to a fault."

"No. Not with the Mihaljevic Act." Rico gave a sad shrug. "Maybe it's our penance, Lieutenant Hill. Did you ever stop to think of that?"

"What's our penance?"

"The Mihaljevic Act. It's our punishment for being a nation that eats its young. Through neglect or through oversight, our children keep falling through the cracks, we lose them to gangs and chicken hawks and serial killers. We're damned, but we can't stop it. So we pass this hot law that lets the courts speak for the dead ones and keeps the survivors out of the legal machinery, and we prosecute killers and kidnappers and molesters without heavy testimony or hard evidence, because nothing else seems to work."

"Only we're still damned, Hill. Because now people are taking that law we made to protect the kids and they're using it as a weapon. A perfectly acceptable, perfectly legal murder weapon. It's our penance, all right. God Almighty is mad at us because we can't think of a better way to save our kids."

Kids, I thought, like that one in the airport. It could have easily been me facing justice under the Mihaljevic Act.

Mercifully, our conversation turned to shop talk—the latest phase of the endless Colombian Interdiction, the pros and cons of the Smith and Wesson 9mm Multifires, and we compared notes on busts involving homemade Polaroid pornography. It lasted until we had loaded my

luggage into Rico's cruiser and were on the way into Temple Metro. After pointing out the sight of a landmark bust he'd made, Rico grew quiet.

Then, rather suddenly, he said, "So what do you Detroiters think of all this Insight business?"

It startled me. Had he been able to tell I'd been Looking when I came off the plane?

I managed a contemptuous snort. "It's illegal and it's probably going to stay that way. But I do think it's interesting that Insight has no political borders. Not even the political factions can make up their mind about it."

"What do you think?"

"Me?" I laughed. "I'm no scientist."

"You think it's really a time-travel drug like they say?"

You think it really opens up some kind of window so you can look and see—"

"One expert on CNN said that time travels both ways, if you can handle that," I said, trying to steer the subject away from my opinion. "And another expert said that it was just another hallucinogen."

Rico chuckled. "We've got one judge in Houston, he says this stuff is constitutional. Better than peyote, he says, and he's practically admitted to Looking before passing judgment."

"Supposedly it's got enough of a success rate to make the scoffers take notice."

"How about those side effects?" Rico asked.

I gave him a curious glance.

"I heard that if you take it over and over, it builds up in your system and you start Looking at the way things *could* have turned out. Only you're actually Looking at what happened on another Earth somewhere, because there's this infinite number of Earths stacked next to each other like stations on an FM dial. Like this stuff builds up so you can switch channels. Weird."

"Was this guy for or against Insight?"

Rico shrugged. "All I know is, if that's the case, every writer in Hollywood is going to save up his jones money for a couple of bottles of that stuff. Can you imagine that somewhere out there, Hitler won the Second World War?"

"Who'd want to Look at something like that?" I asked.

Indeed, why waste your time? Why waste it on something so mind-bogglingly big and depressing? Why bother when there were plenty of other things to Look at?

In spite of protests that my day had been long even before I had left Detroit, Rico insisted on taking me to a steak house where the meat was cut before your eyes and grilled over a mesquite fire. This was his way of introducing me to an Australian beer that came in huge cans. He discovered it, he said, when arresting a drunk driver who insisted he'd only had three beers.

"Only three beers," Rico laughed. "They were equal to a six pack and then some."

Inside the motel room, I didn't even bother to unpack. I tossed my luggage on the floor, peeled off my clothes, and laid down with forty minutes' worth of Insight under my tongue.

Manny.

He's riding a motorcycle through town. A car full of kids on a beer drunk peels out of the parking lot of a local tavern. They broadside the cycle.

Manny's leg is smashed and is broken in six places. He'd lose the leg except his pelvis is crushed, too. He'd never walk again except there are tire marks across his chest and half of his ribs are flailed. He'd have suffocated except his neck was also snapped. He'd have been a quadriplegic except that his skull was pulverized.

At twenty-six, Manny is reduced to so much oozing meat on a busy stretch of road.

He didn't have a chance.

Rico came to my room early the next morning. I was in much better shape, having put ten hours sleep between myself and the last insight. This was a good thing because the sergeant was in particularly rare form, regaling me with sordid tales of his hitch in the Navy and the lengths to which one of his buddies had gone to win the affections of a woman in the Philippines.

"And now," Rico laughed, "she makes more money than he does with this restaurant of hers in Houston. She even speaks better English than he does, without the trace of a strange accent."

"Filipino?" I asked.

"No," Rico answered loudly. "Texan!" He roared with mirth.

At the detention center they gave me a clip-on pass with my photo and a verification bar-code. After meeting with the lieutenant in charge, I asked to be taken to see the runaways.

"Who do you want to see first?" Rico asked, taking me down the long concrete corridor. The place had recently been painted and had a sickly sweet aroma. "He or she?"

"He or she. He or she." I shrugged. "Surprise me."

Rico stopped suddenly. "All right. We'll do it this way." He pulled the badge off his clip and slid it through the optical reader on a door to his left. "This one's closest."

Gears in the door groaned and it loosened in its housing. Rico grabbed the handle and swung it open. "Louie, Louie, oh-oh," he sang. "You got a visitor." Rico extended his hand to me like a country gentleman bidding me to enter the cell. I stepped up to the door and peered in.

"Louis Havermeier?" I asked.

The boy in the cell looked up. That was him, all right. I recognized him from the holo I'd been given by the girl's father. The kid wore glasses with octagonal wire rims that had gone out of style when the musiker who wore them met with an untimely demise some three years ago. The fluorescent orange jumpsuit that the jail had provided him didn't do much for his looks. He was skinny and drawn, pale with jet black hair, his face bony and his eyes scared.

He stammered at me. "Y-y-yes sir?"

I held out my hand and shook with him. His palm was sweaty and he didn't grip my hand at all. Like holding a dead carp, Manny would've said. Manny wouldn't have liked this kid because of that. Maybe in prison they'll teach him to shake hands like a man, he'd have said. Perhaps it was good that Manny wasn't here.

"Lieutenant Hill," I said. "Detroit PD. I'm the one who'll be taking you back."

Louis looked away and bit his lip. "Oh." His arms crept up from his side and he hugged himself.

"Well," Rico said with a gloating tone that I really couldn't stand, "I see you two have some catching up to do, so I'll leave you to it." He tipped his fingers to the brim of his ball cap. "Lieutenant, when you want out, card the inner lock. I'll confirm it."

"Thank you, Sergeant," I said curtly, then waited for the door to close.

I stood for a moment and stared at Louis. If I gave him long enough, he might open up a little. He did. It took about two minutes.

"I didn't . . . we didn't think we were doing anything wrong," he said.

I shook my head. "That doesn't wash, Louis. You know that."

Louis swore bitterly. He shook his head and a tangle of black hair fell down over his glasses. He swept it back with his hand.

"I know about your father, Louis. If there's anything I can do to help—"

Louis jumped to his feet. "If you want to help, Lieutenant, you'll get 'lissa and me out of here and then leave us alone. We were doing fine."

"You took her father's car—"

"It was her car."

"You stole gasoline in Oklahoma and groceries in Missouri—"

"Did they show you my notebook, Lieutenant? We had every intention of paying those places back. I had a job in Houston . . ."

"Alissa's father has taken care of the money."

Louis snorted. "He would."

"You don't seem to understand." I let my voice rise, just a little. "Alissa is a minor and you took her across the state line. Now I don't know if you two had some sort of pseudo-spiritual pact or a friend registered to a Neochurch who bonded you, or even if you both kept your hands to yourselves. It looks bad—"

"You're the one who doesn't understand, Lieutenant Hill. Alissa and I have kept each other alive—"

"Don't give me that young love stuff," I said, too loudly this time. "Louis, I can't even count the cases I've run through juvenile systems that started because two kids got a bad case of hormonal swelling—"

"That's not us—"

"—but it's not fun and games anymore. In the last ten years the stakes have gotten deadly, Mister Havermeier. According to files, you're also underage. That may be a blessing. It may be all that stands between you and enforcement of the Mihaljevic Act."

Like I said, Louis Havermeier was a pale kid. He couldn't have turned any whiter, so he turned grey.

"You didn't even have to cross the state line, Louis. It quit being a game the minute Alissa went with you without her father's permission."

I let him stew. I could hear him trying to regain control of his breathing.

"You didn't know, did you?"

"It was 'lissa's father, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"He can't make it fly. He won't."

"A kidnapped minor is a kidnapped minor, Louis—"

*"But she came with me! And she'll testify—"*

"Don't bet on it," I said. "The Mihaljevic Act can be enforced without testimony from the victim because victims usually end up dead. Alissa's father has you in his sights. If he doesn't have you needed for this, it'll be because of your status as a minor."

Louis sat down hard on his bed. "Why are you telling me all of this, Lieutenant?" he asked in a thin voice.

"Because I'm going to need your help."

He looked at me.

"I believe you, Louis. I believe that you had a job in Houston and I believe that you were going to pay for what you took. I don't even have to look at your notebook."

He hung his head down and laughed bitterly.

"I've met Alissa's father," I said. "I can see what kind of a game he's playing. It's wrong, but he's got the law on his side. And now he's taken your wrong and he's going to use it to put you away, for good if he can."

"Where do I fit in? Do I make your bust rate look good?"

"You've got to cooperate with me, Louis," I said.

"You can't fight the extradition. And you've got to talk to Alissa and make it easy for her to go back. If you're going to come out of this alive, you're going to need her, and we'll need her to cooperate with us."

"And if I come out of it with MaxSentence—"

"Then you'll still be alive to fight the conviction. Listen, this relationship you have with Alissa, I don't know if it's on the level or whether your gonads are thinking for you. But if it is on the level, you're going to have to put her first. Your survival depends on it."

"But with MaxSentence—"

"If it's on the level," I said, "she'll wait for you. No matter how long it takes."

Louis didn't move. "I'll think about it."

"Do it fast," I said. "If you're going back, you'll have to sign the papers no later than four o'clock today." I pulled the card off of my tag and slotted it into the reader. After a moment Rico confirmed and the door squealed open.

"Lieutenant Hill," he said as I started out. "I'll help you."

"Thank you, Louis." I smiled.

I stepped out of the cell and closed the door, leaning against it as it latched.

"Hey," Rico said, replacing the card in his badge.

"How'd it go?"

I closed my eyes and kept leaning. "He's not going to fight."

Rico raised a fist in salute. "Outstanding," he said.

"How'd you convince him?"

"I lied about his chances," I said quickly. "Let's go see Alissa."

If I'd never seen the holos of Alissa, I could have given

a description of her based solely on what Louis was like. I've been doing this that long.

It wasn't any surprise that she had a long tangle of peroxide blonde hair that showed mouse brown at the roots. She was fat-faced and a little on the chunky side, not repulsively so, but enough to make boys ignore her and enough to make her cling when someone like Louis showed her attention. She wore the same type jumpsuit that Louis had, but I could easily see her dressed in long, flowing paisley prints and her hair tied up in a scarf, the approximation of the gypsy looks of Deena Roth, a second-generation musiker whose illegitimacy had made her a star.

Nope. No surprises here. And the interview went pretty much the same way. She was sitting on her bed, hands maternally folded over her belly, and her face didn't react when I walked in. To her, I represented the inevitable.

"You're from Detroit," she said, before I had the chance to speak.

"Lieutenant Hill," I said.

"I'm not going back," she informed me. "I don't have to and you can't make me. I want to stay here. With Louis."

"Miss Weir," I said, "if you don't mind, I'd like to explain a couple of things to you."

She crossed her arms and set her nose at an upward tilt. "Forget it. I know what you're going to say. You're going to tell me that I'm a minor and that my father still holds will over me. You're going to tell me that he never signed or acknowledged the emancipation papers I filed. And you're going to tell me that it would be in my best interest to ride this whole thing out at home."

"I'm not stupid, officer. I know my rights. I studied in school, got plus marks in American Civics. I know about Show of Intent, and that's what I got when I filed those papers. So whether Daddy wants me to come home or not, I can fight going back with Show of Intent. I think I can win, too."

"You can talk all you want, officer, but you're not going to get me to go home. Louis needs me."

"He loves you, I suppose."

"He does. And I love him."

How many times, I thought. How many times had I heard this before? In the decade I'd been doing this, you'd think the stories would change, just a little.

"You'd give up a lot for Louis, wouldn't you?"

"You're trying to trick me. It's not going to work."

"If something happened, if he had to go away, would you wait for him? Or what if you had the choice between his life or his death, but life would keep him away from you for a long time? Have you given that any thought, Alissa?"

"He's away from me now."

"Not like he would be. Alissa, Louis has agreed not to fight the extradition. He's going back to Detroit with me."

The girl's face burned red. "You tricked him! He was going to fight it! We agreed—"

"There was something you didn't consider. The Mihaljevic Act." I reached inside my suit coat for two sets of papers.

"You're lying!" Alissa growled. "I know Daddy and I know he's mad, but—"

"He would," I said, and I unfolded the first set of papers and tossed them down beside her. "It's there if you don't believe me. You should recognize the signature as authentic. You may even recognize the name of the signing notary."

She stared hard at the paper. A tear fell from one eye and hit the page with a loud crack. "His secretary," she said.

"By rights, you don't even have to testify," I said. "All that has to be done is for Louis to appear in court. His appointed attorney will argue against the evidence as best as possible, but with that piece of paper, the evidence doesn't have to be compelling. All it takes is review from a judge trained to handle this kind of case, then Louis goes to prison and waits for his lethal injection."

Alissa tried to talk. She couldn't. She sniffed and wiped tears from her eyes.

"But you could testify."

She looked up at me.

"Your testimony could be enough to keep Louis from being needled. He'd probably come out of it with MaxSentence, but that could be fought, reduced. In a sense, you would still have him."

"Daddy wants him dead." She looked back down at the paper.

"That's what he'll get, unless you come home. Don't you see, Alissa? Your father knows you'll stay away. He also knows that in the end, he'll get you back, and when you go back, you'll find that he's removed the last obstacle that keeps your will from breaking." I stopped to let her think about this. She caught on fast.

"Louis," she said.

I took the second set of papers and held them out to her. "This is your ticket home. First Class. The same flights Louis and I will be going on. I may even bend the rules and let you sit together."

She didn't take the ticket. "But when I get home . . ."

"You go home and be the perfect angel," I said. "You be Daddy's Little Girl. Play the game. Get on your father's good side and wait it out. Don't mention Louis, don't even act like you're thinking about him. And then, when his case goes to court, that's when you'll get your say."

"And that'll save him?"

"Perhaps. For the time being. It'll go before a Mihaljevic judge. He'll look at the evidence for your case, including the fact that Louis didn't fight extradition and that you voluntarily returned home and were a Good Little Girl. He'll have to consider your testimony. He'll weigh it against what your father has on Louis, and perhaps it'll be enough to commute punishment to MaxSentence."

"And if it isn't?"

"Alissa, you need to take one thing at a time. If you want to get your Perfect World, you're going to have to start by keeping Louis alive."

"Now, you may think I'm wrong. Maybe you think you can show your love for Louis—or whatever it is you feel for him—by holding out or not going home, or by disappearing. But if you do, I promise that Louis will fall

into the Mihaljevic machinery and you'll never see him again.

"The way I see it, you can get your freedom now, but you'll have to pay for it later. Or you can earn your freedom now, and when you get it, you can enjoy it with a clear conscience."

"But it won't be clear," she said. "Not if Louis gets MaxSentence."

"It'll never be clear," I said, "if you let him die. The choice is yours." I pulled the card from my pocket and slotted it. Rico confirmed and I walked out, leaving her with the court documents and the plane ticket.

"Well?" Rico asked, once the door sealed.

I looked at my watch. "Let's get the paperwork ready," I told him. "She'll fold by noon."

Rico laughed as we started down the hall. "You think so?"

"I know so."

"Well," he said, "as her arresting officer, I say she's a headstrong bitch, and I say now that she's away from Daddy, she's going to let Lover Boy take the prick."

I shook my head. "If it was the other way around—if she was facing extradition—yeah, I'd agree. Romeo has a case of hormones, and he doesn't have his heads aligned. But she's been doing some thinking. I've been at this for ten years, Rico. She'll fold."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I got a Ronald Reagan that says she stiffs Junior."

He held out his hand. I grabbed it and we shook.

"You're on, Sergeant."

At 11:54, Rico walked up to the desk I was using and handed me a crisp new twenty-five-dollar bill.

"You have my respect," he said. "Or maybe I've been on the street too long. I thought I had that girl pegged."

For lunch, he took me across town to some authentically ethnic restaurant where he dined on strips of rattlesnake and rabbit, and I drank one of those big cans of beer he'd been telling me about while trying to force down a bowl of what they called mild chili. He offered to pay, but I covered it with that new Reagan.

After a short afternoon spent collecting signatures from Louis and Alissa, shuffling paperwork, and confirming airline reservations, I had Rico take me back to the motel under the pretense of packing for the early morning flight. I threw everything into my suitcase, an act that took all of five minutes, then I took four Insights.

Now Manny had made it through basic training. He made it through his first year in the military, and was sent as part of the ground forces involved in the first Colombian Interdiction. He made it all the way to Bogotá as he really had, and he was assigned to stay with the occupational forces. And he and some buddies got a day off and went to check out the local bistros.

Only this time, he followed his better judgment. He never ordered that third beer at that small sidewalk cafe. The waiter never was late in bringing it. He never got up to investigate.

So when the remnants of one of the drug cartels



pulled up and riddled the place with Uzi fire, Manny was sitting there, and he took as many bullets as his friends.

The scene started to fade away and I waited to wake up, but it didn't happen. I felt the beginnings of panic, and I was sure that in some motel room in Temple, Texas, I had a death grip on the bed sheets.

Then Manny was on routine patrol, only he was a split-second late in looking up from a reading on his radar gun, so he never saw the pickup truck cross the center line, and the two vehicles met head on. The coroner would say that the impact was so great that it exploded Manny's wristwatch.

The driver, whom Manny had actually lived to arrest for drunk driving, walked away from the accident, and served a minimal sentence because of a legal glitch in his arrest. For the rest of his life, he would brag to friends that he had killed a cop and gotten away with it.

In neither case did Manny have a chance.

The Look ended quickly after that, and I found myself sitting up in bed, covered in sweat, gasping for breath. I had never, ever Looked twice before, and I couldn't stop trembling.

I rolled out of bed and staggered to the sink, running cold water over my neck and face. When the shaking stopped, I dried myself off, glancing at the clock as I did.

The sight filled me with dread.

I had been out for over an hour.

I sat down hard. There was no way I could explain it. I had measured out four tabs of Insight. With my metabolism, it should have only kept me out for forty-five minutes at the maximum.

Unless it was the beer. Articles I had read about Insight said that it didn't seem to be affected by alcohol, but they hadn't taken into account the effect alcohol had on the body. As a depressant, perhaps it had slowed my metabolism and kept me away longer. Or maybe the residue that let me see the alternatives had kept me Looking longer than I had intended. The jury was still out on whether or not Insight could do that.

I pulled the bottle out of my suitcase, intending to count the pills left and reconcile that with what I'd taken to see if I'd accidentally overdosed, but the phone rang. I picked up the handset and managed a hoarse "Hello."

"Hill. It's Rico. Listen, brother, you've got to be ready to go in ten minutes. I'll be right over to pick you up."

"Rico? What's going on?"

"It's Louis," he said. "He tried to hang himself in his cell."

Rico hadn't been ready for the news either. He picked me up in his car, wearing faded jeans, an Astros T-shirt, and his PD cap. He was shaking his head and growling, "Typical stupid juvenile thing to do. Trying to cheat the wheels of justice."

"How did he manage to hang himself?" I asked as he threw the car into gear. "I thought he was secure."

"During dinner," Rico said, "he apparently used the butter knife to worry a slit in the cuff of his overalls.

When he got back to his cell, he tore the thing into strips and braided them into a rope."

"But there's nothing to dangle from in those cells."

"He fastened one end around the plumbing and put a slip knot around his neck. Then he pushed himself across the floor. Fortunately it's a slow process, and one of the guards found him during the regular rounds."

We pulled up to the jail section and Rico took me straight to the infirmary. A guard and a doctor waited outside Louis's room, along with a tearful Alissa.

"How's the boy?" I asked.

"He'll live, no problem," the doctor said. "Whether he wants to is another question."

"His condition?"

"Stable. Alert. Angry that he didn't succeed."

"The girl?"

The doctor looked at her. "Scared. I brought her up, thought it'd be good for him, but he won't see her. Says he doesn't want to see anyone."

"He'll see me."

"I don't recommend it."

"I insist." I looked at Alissa. "I'll straighten this out."

The room was dark except for a reading lamp in the corner where another guard sat scanning a newdisk. Louis was strapped onto a bed, an IV running into his arm. It looked as if he had been sedated. His eyes were half open, trying to burn at me as I walked toward him. Fresh gauze was wrapped around his neck.

I asked the guard to leave, then took his chair and slid it next to the bed.

"Go to hell," Louis rasped.

I shook my head. "Not today. I'm going back to Detroit tomorrow and you're going with me."

He looked away. "Changed mind. I stay 'til I die."

"Think about the stupidity of what you've just said."

"My whole life," he said, a tear spilling down his cheek. "Stupid."

"You were doing this for Alissa, I suppose."

He nodded. "She going back?"

"For you," I said.

Louis shook his head. "Set her free."

"What? You don't want her to go home? You think she should stay here until she's emancipated?"

He nodded.

"You realize if you kill yourself, you're playing right into her father's hands. He wants to get Alissa away from you, forever. Louis, you don't have to hang yourself to do that. All you have to do is tell her to stay."

Louis held up one finger. "She wouldn't." He raised another. "Jail kill me."

"No," I said. "It wouldn't. I've explained that to you, and I've explained it to Alissa. It's a matter of not receiving the death sentence required by the Mihaljevic Act. You end up with a maximum prison term, but at least you're alive to fight it."

He tried to pound on the bed but was held back by the restraints.

"Listen, I can see what you're trying to do for her, but the least you could do is leave her in a position where there's some hope."

His arm jerked against the restraints and the bed rattled. "I have no hope," he rasped. "I go back, get pricked, die. 'lissa loses. I cooperate, go to jail. I wait. There's feeling . . . not knowing. Uncertain future. Never sure what happens. Bad. But. Other things happen in jail. Hill." He looked straight into my eyes and I understood. "*Jail will kill me.*"

"And Alissa loses."

"Yes," he said emphatically. Then he laid his head back and closed his eyes.

"Alissa is waiting outside. Will you see her?"

He shook his head.

"That hurts her."

"She'll hurt anyway. Better now. She can go free."

"Given," I said. "But under those circumstances, she'd probably give up and go home."

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

"If you're gone, she has no reason to stay. She's already free, Louis. You made her that way."

He closed his eyes. Tears lined the rims.

"Well," I stood and carried the chair back to its corner. "I suppose I'd better go talk to Sergeant Rico about rescinding your extradition papers." I had gotten to the door and had my hand on the knob when Louis spoke.

"Hill."

"Yes."

"I'd like to go back."

"That's very wise, Louis. Very wise."

"Hill."

"Yes, Louis?"

"I'd . . ." He stopped. I couldn't tell if it was to swallow or so he could catch his breath. "I'd like to see Alissa."

"I'll send her in."

I walked out into the hall and told Alissa that Louis had asked for her. A howl rose from her throat and she rushed to the door, a guard right behind her. I looked at Rico, who was leaning against the wall, staring out the window.

"*Qué pasa*, Lieutenant?"

I exhaled into a slouch. "You know, I interviewed that kid, talked to him about the girl, and not once—not once did he mention the word 'love.'"

Rico straightened. "Hormones," he laughed. "It's the hormones. They go wild. I'm telling you, Lieutenant, they should take those sex-offender-grade hormonal suppressants and they should make all boys take them between twelve and twenty-one." He gave me an amused look. "Love."

"But that's the problem," I said. "He didn't have to say it. It's the real thing. As much as that kid is able to at his young age, he loves her, Rico. He really does."

It seemed dark—very dark—as Rico drove me back to the motel. The sky was covered with black, churning clouds which blotted out the setting sun and made it seem later than it actually was.

Rico, who had been silent in reaction to my silence, suddenly offered a piece of advice. "Keep your television on."

I looked at him. "What?"

He pointed at the sky. "The weather. Maybe a tornado. Turn your television to a local station, because if one comes, they'll send out a tone to wake you so you can take cover. Nights like this, some stations run those old Warner Brothers cartoons between weather bulletins. Great stuff."

"Thanks." I stared out the windshield, almost hypnotized by the wipers pushing away the sheets of rain.

"Did you ever wonder about the law, Rico? Did it ever strike you that sometimes, no matter how carefully the lines are drawn, it doesn't cover everything? And that despite all the acts and accords drawn up since the turn of the century, things can still be manipulated by the right person? I mean, I lost my partner and the ones who killed him walked. And the reasons why they got off were ridiculous. Three consecutive miscarriages of justice. What's a person supposed to make of all that?"

Rico didn't take his eyes from the road. "I don't think about that. I try not to. Thinking like that will get a man in trouble. The way I see it, this is my job. I'm like the banker or the tortilla man or the construction worker, only I wear a gun. And when I've put in my time, I punch the clock and go home."

I nodded. "Wouldn't it be nice?"

"You do what you can to survive, Lieutenant." He pulled into the motel parking lot and glided to a stop by my door. "If we don't keep our wits about us, there'll be nobody left to do our job."

"Right," I said, getting out of the car. "Thanks, Rico. See you bright and early."

He gave me a thumbs-up. "Five-thirty."

I walked through a puddle to my door and got the key into the lock when Rico called to me.

"Don't lose any sleep over those kids," he said. "They may have been right, but what they did was wrong. The original statue of Justice—she was never blindfolded."

"Thanks," I said, and let myself in.

The room was dark and cold. I preferred it that way. I took a long, hot shower and then flipped through the television channels. Each local station and the cable distributor had added words and symbols to the screen to indicate the severity of the weather.

By nine o'clock I could see that nothing threatened the immediate area, so I turned the set off and called room service for a five A.M. wake-up. Then I crawled into bed with a single tab of Insight to knock me out.

Nothing happened. The tablet dissolved under my tongue and I lay in bed, listening to the hiss of traffic on the wet streets and trying to concentrate on Manny.

I fished two more out of the bottle and tried again. Still nothing. I lay in the dark, waiting for the familiar sensation to hit. It never came. I pulled the bottle off the night stand and shook it, listening to the glassy rattle.

Maybe they were going bad.

A few minutes later, I swallowed three more. I lay there with my eyes closed until a flash of bright light came through my eyelids and a percussive clap made me sit up in bed.

Rain was pelting hard against the windows. The storm was hitting full force. There was another flash of

lightning, another shot of thunder. I bolted out of bed and turned the television on.

I stopped on a channel that was showing the time. It was 12:21.

Over three hours had passed, and I hadn't slept. I hadn't been Looking, either. If I had, there had been nothing to see.

Perhaps I had been Looking at nothing.

There was another thunderclap. I twisted the dial until I found a Warner Brothers cartoon, which was followed by a tired-looking news anchor. The anchor gave the weather, which he said would bark worse than bite, then he handed things over to a fresher-looking woman who gave local headlines.

I had calmed down and was about to turn the set off when a graphic appeared behind the woman that read *Runaways*. I brought up the volume.

"—Police reports that two runaways who left I.O.U.'s at stores that they robbed will be returning to Detroit early this morning. Sergeant John Rico of the juvenile division says that the boy, who was going with his girlfriend to seek work in the Houston area, will face charges under the Mihaljevic Act."

I slumped back in the chair. The kids, Rico was right. I had to do my job and let the law handle the rest. But sometimes there was no justness in justice—I knew that well enough. Even so, the wheels had to turn.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Louis, Louis," I said aloud. "What am I going to do with you?"

Then the Insight hit me. Hard.

Louis got a job in a town between Temple and Houston, working as a roughneck on an oil rig. It was hard work, but without a degree, it was all Louis could get to support the woman he passed off as his young bride and the child she was carrying. There weren't that many jobs left where an employer wouldn't look too deeply into someone's past without asking questions that would be hard for Louis to answer.

Accounts of what happened next varied.

In spite of precautions, a stupid and immature mistake cost Louis his life when he was overcome by hydrogen sulfide gas.

Or he was barbecued in a rig explosion that also killed two veterans of the trade.

Or he was killed in an accident after turning in co-workers for substance abuse. Or he was shot to death when he stopped with the boys for a beer and a jealous patron took offense at the way his wife looked at the lad. Sometimes it was simply a senseless car accident.

Every time Louis was killed, Alissa went home. Sometimes she tried to stick it out in Texas. Sometimes she immediately retreated. Every time, her father turned her away at the door.

Louis was also blown up or burned or broken by the oil patch. He survived, physically destroyed. Alissa went to work, but all she ever found were jobs in all-night convenience stores or motels or factories.

And because Louis was paralyzed, she had affairs—most of the time.

A lot of the time, she disappeared, leaving Louis in a hospital, a child at the babysitter's, and a trail of unpaid bills. Sometimes she stayed, but she usually ended up kidnapped, raped, and killed.

Once, Louis made it. He managed to get through college over a harrowing seven-year stretch. He became a software designer twice and an accountant once. Each time, he ended up in Chicago. After the money came, he started to hate Alissa and their children. He divorced her. She went back to Detroit. Her father rejected her. She killed herself.

Or, Louis beat her. She took the kids and vanished. One by one, the kids turned up with her relatives. She ended up on the streets of L.A., dead of AIDS or worse.

He beat her again. She wouldn't give him a divorce. He arranged her murder and got away with it, squeezing between the wheels.

Sometimes Louis went the other way, emotionally and geographically. He loved her so much that on a number of occasions, he let her go. That never did wash with her father. Louis faded away or died by his own hand or as another statistic of the Mihaljevic Act.

Or he ended up in Florida, loving her so much that he was running drugs or guns or bioparts, and he usually ended up jailed or dead or brainwiped, and she ended up with the kids being taken away from her, by her father or by the government.

None of it was pretty.

Then there was the thunderstorm.

It was breaking over a section of badlands, over a valley that held a small mobile home. There was a chain-link fence, a stone driveway, a yard with a swing set, and a lawn that had not seen enough water during that Texas summer.

A truck rounded the corner, one with tool boxes and ladders and cable loaded on the back. On the sides was painted SOUTH TEXAS POWER AND LIGHT.

The truck pulled up in a cloud of dust and stopped next to a faded blue Chevy. An older Louis, ripened, wrinkled, and aged by hard work, got out, dressed in a faded uniform.

He slipped through the gate, and there came a commotion from inside the trailer. A door opened, and a black-and-white cocker spaniel bitch scrambled out of the house, five matching puppies behind her. Louis closed the gate and met the dogs, scratching their ears and patting them.

A four-year-old girl and a boy still in diapers came next. They threw themselves on his neck. He wrapped his arms around them and stood in one smooth motion, stepping lightly toward the trailer, trying not to step on the pups.

Alissa appeared at the door, stirring a bowl of cookie dough. She was older and heavier, and delivering two children had put lines on her face. But she was smiling, and her eyes gleamed when she saw Louis.

Louis stopped when he saw her. He put the children down. She took a hesitant step onto the porch.

"I need to buy some neckties," he said. "I got the promotion."

The bowl exploded on the porch and she ran to meet him as the pups scampered to lick the sweet batter off of the ground.

The storm hit, and they stood in the rain, watching their children and their dogs, and the sky full of black, churning clouds.

Then, as vivid as that moment was, it began to fade.

I felt the rain, and it chilled me to the bone. I coughed and started to shake it off when something caught me by the shirt and lifted me up.

"Damn you, Hill! Wake up!"

It was airborne, but only for a moment. I landed on something soft and bounced. I opened my eyes to see Rico, standing over me with a dripping ice bucket in his hand. I croaked his name.

He threw the bucket aside and grabbed me by the shoulders, lifting me off of the bed. "Get up, you stoned son of a bitch."

I shook my head. It started to clear.

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? You were late! I thought you were dead! I had them call the room, you didn't answer. I thought the Hispanic Liberation Front had gotten in and cut your throat!" He threw me into the chair by the television. "I wish I had found you dead!" He fished my bottle of Insight out of his pocket and shook it in my face. The glassy rattle mocked me. "I don't know how you guys play the game in Detroit, Lieutenant Hill, and if this is any indication, I don't want to know. But I do know that we play it clean and straight here in Texas."

"The hell with the game," I said groggily. "There are times when you can't win it. You know that, don't you, Rico?"

"I don't want to hear your excuses—"

"I don't have an excuse," I shouted. "I'm talking about something different. One way or the other, Rico, if Louis goes to jail, he dies. You know that, don't you?"

He looked at me in disbelief. "Not those damned kids. Is that why you're doing this?"

"The law doesn't work. Not in this case."

Rico turned away. "Look," he said, "I know you've lost your partner. You're hurting from that. I've never been in that position, and I hope I never will be, but I can tell you one thing. I'll never resort to something like this."

He turned the bottle over in his hand and studied it. "I can't tell you how disappointed I am with you. And of course—" He tossed the bottle up and snatched it out of the air. "I have every right to arrest you."

I coughed and wiped away the last of the water he had thrown on me. "Maybe you should," I said. "But I'd appreciate it if you didn't."

"Don't tell me you're only a month from retirement," he snapped.

"No. I'm nowhere near retirement. You can pop me and ruin my career, but I'll come back, Sergeant. I'll come back as a car salesman or a security consultant or a private investigator. Who knows? Maybe you'd be doing me a favor by getting me out of this business."

"But if you pop me now, you're going to screw up any chance we have to help those two kids."

Rico's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about? Do I want to know about this?"

"No," I assured him. "But I'll tell you if I must."

He looked at the bottle of pills in his hand.

"You're right about one thing, Sergeant. We need to do our jobs and damn the consequences and let the law do its work. But sometimes you can't help it. Sometimes you think, even when you don't want to. If it hasn't happened to you yet, don't worry. It will."

Rico didn't say anything. But he looked at me, and the look told me that he knew I was right.

"There were these two hookers who used to hang out on Gratiot Avenue in Detroit," I said. "One's a girl, the other's a transvestite. They look so much alike and they were both so dog ugly that we called them the Pig Sisters."

"My partner Manny and I, working juvenile division, were supposed to patrol and keep our eyes out for run-aways, bust bars for serving to kids, that kind of stuff. It was never our job to pay attention to the likes of the Pig Sisters, but we did anyway. You know, trying to make Detroit a little bit better place to live. The usual idealistic rot."

"Anyway, Manny and I had shook them loose from the avenue a hundred, maybe a thousand times. You know, move it elsewhere, there are respectable people here, all of that. And they'd go."

"So one day, we shake them, we come back, they're still there. The teevie and the girl are arguing. They were pretty piled up, on stuff a lot worse than Insight. So we shook them again. I'm leading the teevie away, and as we go, the girl pulls a .25 auto from under her breast and puts one right behind Manny's left ear. I can still see it, Rico, in slow motion. I look back as Manny starts to say something, and the gun comes up—"

I stopped. I heard the Insight rattle in Rico's hand.

"That's . . . that's still no reason for you to resort to this. The way it happened, you played it right. Nobody was to blame. Your partner never had a chance."

I looked at the pills. "I know. I know without a shadow of a doubt that he literally never had a chance."

Rico closed his hand around the Insight.

"But does that mean we deny someone a chance if they've got it, no matter how slight the odds, when every other option is death or separation? Even if the odds of things working out are one in a thousand? One in ten thousand? A million? Do you believe justice is a working legal machine, or is the concept that everyone gets a chance to make their lives good?"

He looked up at me again, sad and understanding.

"Rico. Do you believe in fairness, even if the machinery you're sworn to uphold is not the way to make it happen? Even in the most singularly unexceptional case?"

He took a breath and closed his eyes. "If we hurry, we can still get you on your flight."

I stood. "Of course."

He shook his fist. The pills sang inside the tiny bottle. "I don't know what you have in mind, Lieutenant. I don't

want to know, either. All I can say is that whatever happens had better not happen in my jurisdiction, or I swear by my badge that I'll ruin you."

"Understood." I turned and hurried to gather my things.

"Lieutenant."

Rico held out the bottle of Insight.

I shook my head. "I've seen enough."

Louis was very cooperative. He came out of the jail dressed like a modern teen, and I fastened a controller collar around his neck, waving a small box in his face.

"This is the trigger to that collar," I said. "The only way to get it off is with this little box." I slipped the box into my pants pocket. "Make sure you cooperate, and pray I don't have to scratch myself. If I hit the trigger, it's fifty thousand volts to stun. You'll wake up with such a headache."

He paled at this.

I laughed. "Don't worry. I don't scratch myself that often—at least, not in public. Don't try anything stupid like casually walking away, either. This has an effective range of a hundred meters. Not that you could walk out of here without someone noticing that pretty thing to begin with." I fingered the fluorescent orange material to make sure it was loose enough over the gauze on his throat.

Airport security let me board the commuter with Louis first. Alissa, as a passenger, was one of the last to get on. The hostess seated her toward the front of the plane.

"You'll have to watch yourself and make sure you stay in line at the Dallas/Fort Worth air terminal," I said. "It's a crazy place. Anything can happen there. Everything, and too much of it."

He stared out the window, a blank look on his face. "Yeah. Right."

"I don't want anything to happen to you."

Louis waited until the plane was airborne before saying anything else. "Lieutenant?" he asked softly. "You did promise that Alissa and I could sit together."

"I promise that the two of you will be together after Dallas," I said. "But for this flight, let's keep up appearances. All right?"

He nodded and fingered the gauze wrap.

"Do you trust me, Louis?"

He gave a noncommittal shrug. "Yeah."

"Good," I said. "Now I want you to remember something."

He was rolling his eyes. I could tell from the motion of his head.

"When you've got something precious, you want to keep it. And if you lose it, you fight like hell to get it back, and then you do everything in your power to keep it. Right?"

Nothing.

"Whatever it takes, Louis. Remember that. Whatever it takes, even if it takes everything out of you, even if you think you're exhausted and can't give any more."

"Whatever it takes," he said in an annoyed whisper.

"That's right. Make sure you don't lose it again. Something worth having is something worth fighting to keep. Whatever it takes."

"Yeah."

"One other thing, Louis."

"What now?"

"How would you feel about working for a public utility? Nothing glamorous, mind you. Maybe start off in a menial job and work your way up over the course of a lifetime."

Louis folded his arms and winced as the plane rocked under a pocket of turbulence. "Lieutenant," he said, "are you living in the same reality that I am?"

I punched the button on my seat and let it back. "Not right now," I said, closing my eyes. "But I will be. You wait. Wait and see." ♦

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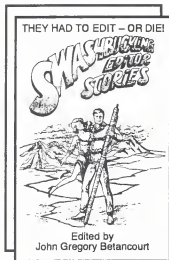
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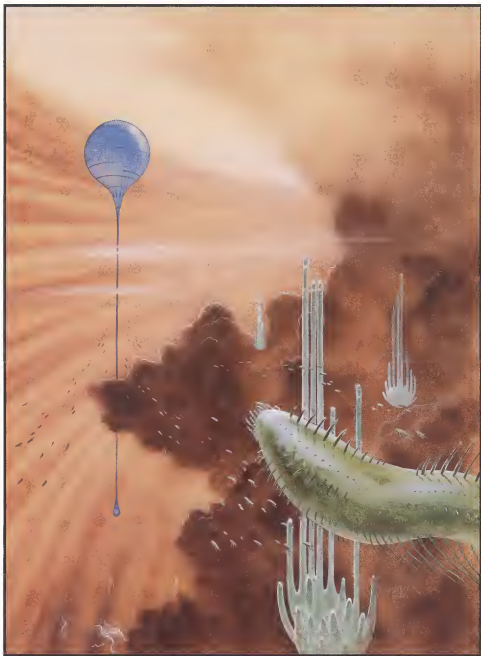
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# Deep Gladiators



Phillip C. Jennings

*Dear Seeba,*

*Thank you and your classmates for your letters. I liked your questions (so many of them!) and I thought that if I answered you in particular, you might share my words with Cerise and D'Art and the others.*

*The Jupitat encloses 16,800 square meters of floor space, including the pools where we spend most of our time, living like amphibians. I'm keying this letter while I sit in water, if you can imagine that. Think of your schoolrooms and hallways flooded up to your shoulders all the time, with just a few dry platform-islands for special purposes! Most of our workstations are designed for semi-immersion, because otherwise the*

Illustration by Ron Miller



gravity is so strong we can't get around well without our wheelchairs.

*This place has plenty of room for the forty-two of us. We don't feel crowded. Don't forget, we can look outside the bubble, and see huge vistas. There are only two cloud decks above our own ammonia-water stratum, and because this level has one-thousandth as much H<sub>2</sub>O as it's "supposed" to have, the clouds aren't as thick as people expected. Some sunshine gets down through fifteen hundred kilometers of air. It's pretty dim, but now and again we see shafts of light breaking through, and because our latitude is getting closer to*

"All right, I'm here," Meilin said. "I made my decision."

Rav turned from his keyboard and stood out of his chair. His face lit up and he swam on a converging course, toward the Lounge Five windows. What should he say to her? Meilin's rendezvous was a surrender, an acknowledgment of a long-unspoken bond—or was that just a fantasy? Words would trivialize the moment.

They kissed. Afterward she stepped back and spoke first: "I always try to look out with new eyes, as if I'd never seen it before; the blues and grays, the layered cloud decks, deep evening in all directions, and black night boiling up from below."

The black was brown-tinged, arteries of abyssal lighting flashing red through clotted clouds. At intervals the Jovians and their artifacts were briefly visible. Rav moved closer to Meilin, glanced over his shoulder, and saw Daffyd standing in the entryway, waves rippling out ahead of him like oil in Jupiter's heavy gravity.

*Damn the man! As if his every gesture weren't a lie, Rav paddled ever so casually from the window where Meilin lingered, still staring out at the lightning display. I have no reason to blush, he told himself. She's a free woman, isn't she? So why should I panic?*

"It's visibly obvious," Daffyd spoke, moving in from the bulkhead. Rav's heart beat faster: *What's visibly obvious? The fact that I'm crazy about your former wife?*

All this blinked through his head in the moment before Daffyd went on: "We don't need instruments to tell we're getting closer to the edge. Not any more."

The big man's words were much too loud for his distance: Lounge Five wasn't that large. Worse yet, when Rav failed to answer promptly, the Jupitat's SecOp raised his voice. "Everything's brighter now, out there. Brighter than a full moon, at the very least."

"Yes, I can see that," Rav said. "We dimmed the room lights to bring it out. So we could watch." When had Brother Daffyd first peeped in? Had he been spying on them? Was he angry? In this ultra-thick air, human vocal cords could shout loudly enough to reverberate and hurt; waves of pain. A harsh voice was a weapon—if your victim had a headache, for instance.

*No, I'm just feeling guilty!* Rav thought.

"What do you suppose it means, then?" Daffyd went on.

"I know what you're hoping," Rav answered, trying not to wince. A wombug skittered by on a random course, no part of these events, paddling for all the world like a

baby turtle. Rav's toes felt for the floor, and he turned without splashing. "We'll reach wind-shear latitude, and it'll be some kind of ecological border, and our Jovian enemies will give up and let us go. Saved by a miracle."

"It means *something*," Meilin insisted as Daffyd swam to her side. She looked pretty and petite next to his hulking musculature—Jupiter-petite. To Earthly eyes she had the hips and rib girth of a Russian shot-put champion, but Earth was a long way away.

Lord, she was sexy, her wide Chinese face finely proportioned to the rest of her body. *Exotic-erotic*, Rav thought. "They're pushing us that way, right out of the north tropical zone," the woman of his recent fantasies continued. "It isn't our motion. They've preempted us."

"It muddies up their experiment, doesn't it?" Daffyd asked. He passed her by, not touching, to look out the window himself. "Do they expect us to subduct down into their kind of heat? God forgive me, I hate this! Worrying whether we're doomed, and guessing at the specifics."

Rav knew better than to think Daffyd was whining. No, not whining, as people of distant memories whined on a distant world. They'd gone through every phase in the book these two decades, phases when it was taboo to confess their fears, and phases when it was merely tiresome, because when had the Jupitat's crew ever known an hour of security? But for Daffyd the SecOp, this was professional talk, talk about his failures, and Earth's. It was humility and penitence, and it was easy to be open, because who could have guessed that they'd have these problems? Who could have guessed?

Daffyd was a much-forgiven man. There was a lot of forgiveness going around these days, and a lot of people resolving to live their last hours in holiness and nobility.

Rav dipped his face, and rinsed off before he spoke. "That's not why they're doing it. *Whatever* our latitude, we'll subduct if they weigh the outer bubble down enough. We'll sink into hell's furnace until the whole works melts, if that's the way they want it."

He had his reasons to talk just as openly as Daffyd: he was ComL B. Communications had been Arne's job, but Arne took the easy way out three years ago, just so much biomass, and now Rav was in charge of letters and publicity releases and all that showy stuff. It made him important back on Earth. They blipped pictures of *Dr. Rav Misbra* on CNN whenever Jupiter got into the news.

The pictures were twenty years old, footage from when Rav had hair. Or else they showed him wigged, from the neck up. The public might remember that the Jupitat's crew lived in water, but it was indiscreet to tell them they lived naked and bald.

*Like a bunch of martyr frogs*, Rav thought to himself, slipping into his workstation chair. He raised his massive arms out of the water into more-than-double gravity to adjust the screen and tilt the keyboard, just as if—well, yes, he'd been interrupted while doing his job, his ComL B job, which could be done anywhere in the Jupitat, versus his mBioG job, which required a shielded lab and clean-room sterility.

Meilin spoke against the silence, as if she too were

the kind of professional who'd never think of a romantic tryst. "That tall pipe out there?" She raised an arm to point it out. "I've been counting. The worms take turns; the shortest one is followed by one of the longest. They go in strict order, a cycle of fourteen. They seem energetic during their stints, but if you consider that they rest for five minutes between each quarter-minute shift of work—"

"What? You're saying they're feeble?" Daffyd asked.

"We know they're anaerobic," she explained. "When life on Earth became oxygen-dependent, we extracted eighteen times as much energy from our food as before. Of course, that might be a bad analogy. They'd be livelier on their home turf: four hundred fifty degrees Kelvin. Our altitude must seem very cold."

"The poor things," Daffyd said. "I know I should say that as if I meant it, as if—well, you know. 'Love thy enemy.' Sure, they've got a point of view. We're the invaders, and we might muck up their ecosystem. I'd bleed for them, I really would, if my blood were poisonous."

Rav swiveled his chair, the better to watch Daffyd wrestle his conscience into submission. Christianity lost this time around. "Bring your data to the council meeting," the SecOp went on. "Tell them what you think. Oh, and Rav? You know what we want from you, right? Hemoglobin options."

"Yes. Don't worry." On Rav's screen A:SEEBALET was unfinished. He windowed back and then forward through his first paragraphs. After a moment's consideration, Rav deleted *getting closer to* and looked around. The lounge was empty; Meilin had left seconds after Daffyd.

*I'll get you yet, my pretty!* Rav thought, to stave off his disappointment.

*is getting closer to only a hundred kilometers from the edge of the north polar cloud band, we get a fair amount of lightning.*

*We recycle everything, but we don't depend on solar light or any kind of photosynthesis to grow food. The Jupital has a sort of "keel" that dips down into higher temperatures, and we exploit the thermal differences for our energy. Everything on Jupiter depends on what level you're at. We're living where the temperature is slightly less than three hundred degrees Kelvin—just right for us, and the outside pressure is five atmospheres.*

*We float because*

—*Hemoglobin*, Rav thought, thinking of his other life and his other career. The thought made him grimace. Right now he'd do anything to be a poor black school-girl on Chicago's south side. But the most he could do was to send Seeba a bit of his soul, no matter how public this letter became after he transmitted it.

He set to work where he'd left off.

*We float because our bubble is Hardness Fourteen, hard enough to resist compression. The materials inside (air, water, organics and gear) were calculated to park us at this level. If our bubble were compressible we'd sink into the chloride/bromide/iodide cloud bank, and even-*

*tually any bits that were left would fall into clouds made largely of gaseous quartz, at fifteen hundred degrees Kelvin!*

*You wonder if we're afraid of things like that. If my forty-one comrades are like me, they were afraid way back when we launched off Earth into the Jupital, and then they were afraid again when we left Earth orbit for the years-long trip to Jupital. They were afraid when we dove into the Jovian magnetosphere, because it's so powerful; but we had lots of shielding and most of our gear is photonic rather than electromagnetic so it kept on working.*

*All these were the normal, expected fears, and we worried as we sank into the atmosphere—would the bubble hold up? Would we bob too deep? Would we be tossed around by turbulence?*

*I don't know how to put this gently, but from your school's address, you don't live in a gentle neighborhood. Maybe you don't expect everything to work out like it does on happytime video. TV tells you that drugs can't solve your problems, but TV makes things simpler than they are in real life. So I can tell you: there's a drug called *Indural* that keeps panic from taking over. Thanks to that drug, we just barely weathered all these fears. It helped that we knew what we were going to run into. Our robot probes had gone before us.*

*Still, we were close to cracking, and when we ran into unexpected troubles, it was too much for some of us. We had a crew of sixty-five when we left Earth. Sixty-five then, and forty-two now. We all knew we'd spend the rest of our lives in the Jupital, but it hasn't been that long. High gravity stimulates the production of human growth hormone, the same stuff they give to old people that keeps them healthy and active, so we're not aging normally—physiologically I'm nowhere near fifty-two years old. I still look like I did on Earth, except I'm a whole lot stronger. We don't really know how long we can bop to live. Here's the bad part that makes up for that good news: only four of our twenty-three deaths were due to natural causes. The rest were suicides. Maybe your teacher won't like you to read this paragraph out loud, because we're supposed to be heroes out here, but I think hardly any of us signed up for the Jupital to be a hero.*

*We signed up because the enlistment campaign*

—The intercom spoke: "Rav? The meeting's about to start. Can you come up now?" It was Carol's voice, and her talent to get people assembled without hard feelings. With a sigh Rav saved the file. He logged off, and swam for the bulkhead door.

The interior hall took him past other doors before reaching the Level Five ramp. Carefully Rav walked up into mere air, and the full burden of Jovian gravity. Wheelchairs stood by the elevators, but he hadn't done his hours yet today; he was fresh and could get along without them. Earth had its freaks, enormous men who massed over three hundred kilos. Even at that weight, many could walk short distances, and Rav wasn't handicapped by their outsized dimensions. All he had to do was totter into the elevator, speak a number, grab the railings, and hold on. The car rose gently.

It opened onto another platform-and-ramp, and the smells of occupation. Level Six was highly populated; right in the middle of things, the level best shielded against radiation, back when radiation had been a problem. The Jupitat's crew lived in Level Six during the long trip out to Jupiter. They still met here. If Rav's knees hadn't started to give him twinges, he might even walk to the meeting, but instead he shambled down the ramp, and into the support of lukewarm water.

He saw Daffyd through the council room door. The SecOp waved him in. "Welcome! Here's your chair!" It meant Rav was part of the act, structured into the big man's show. Well, all right. It was good to have allies, even if it left him feeling puppetlike and used.

The meeting got under way after Carol recited yesterday's minutes. "It's a contest, folks," Daffyd said. "Our kind of life versus the Jove-worms', and they're building their colosseum all around us. Once they breach our walls, we'll leak out our wombugs, and soon they'll know whether our biota is lethal to theirs, or vice versa.

"Supposing we'll all be dead in a minute or two, the eventual triumph of Earthly viruses and bacteria over their Jovian equivalents might not seem very interesting to you. Is that an understatement, or what?"

A ripple of bitter laughter passed down the long table. Rav turned to look at twelve faces. They looked all the more identical for being hairless; bald, corded with muscle, various shades of pink and brown. Yet no two shared the same focus. It had been months since they'd worked as a team on the wombug project. For the moment, that team spirit was dead.

Daffyd spoke again. "Okay, from here it gets scientific. I'm passing the gavel to Meilin, and she'll talk about that."

"We've used the threat of infecting the Jovians to counter their own threats," Meilin began. She cleared her throat nervously, and went on. "So from the start we took part in setting the terms of this coming struggle. The Jovian atmosphere is mostly  $H_2$ , but it's got sulfides and cyanides that are poisonous to us oxygen-users. Now here's your surprise. When life began on Earth, these chemicals were far from poisonous. In fact, they were essential to prokaryotic evolution. So it's true; our most primitive biological cousins are going to find conditions out there pleasantly familiar."

"Except for not enough water," someone said.

"We've got tons of water in the Jupitat, and if things get gory it's going to leak out into the, uh, colosseum. We think that Jovian life is anti-water in some way. It uses  $H_2O$ , and dissociates it. That makes us and them incompatible. Our prokaryotes either win or die."

One of the faces came suddenly alive, struck by hope. "Maybe they'll let us live," Leon said. "A leak from the Jupitat, yes, but a controlled small leak, so we can witness the conflict and report home to Earth!"

"We'll know soon enough," Daffyd answered, as always speaking too loud for comfort. "My friend Rav was just saying, before the meeting, that they could push us all down into their home heat, subduct the whole arena another hundred kilometers. If they're not doing that—

well, it gives us hope. As God's my witness, the cruellest thing I could do after all we've been through is to string you along on such thin rations as these, so I don't want to say anything definite. Not yet. But *if we're alive to see the eco-battle, whether we live afterward depends on its outcome!* Have I got your attention now? Meilin's just told us about the first skirmish, the one where our wombugs rout the Jovians on the single-cell front. But what then? There's a big difference between bacteria and human beings. Rav"

Like Meilin, Rav began by clearing his throat. It was an infectious habit: he noticed that people were doing it now and again around the room. "Sulfides and cyanides are poisonous to almost all eukaryotes such as ourselves," he started. "But some eukaryotes live near hot sulfur vents in the deep oceans of Earth, and carry those poisons *through* their bodies to be digested by the bacteria in their guts. I refer specifically to *Riftia pachyptila*, which has no mouth, no intestinal tract—it just 'breathes' poisoned water, and lets its hemoglobin carry the burden.

"We can modify any eukaryote to use the kind of hemoglobin *Riftia* has evolved. Oh, it's bulky: each resultant molecule will weigh two million daltons. But it can be done. It's in our genetic repertoire. Ladies and gentlemen, this 'colosseum' being built all around us is an experimental laboratory. Right now it belongs to our enemies, but if we succeed against them, let's use it to create transitional forms of life, forms that give us a future on this biggest of all planets. We came here years ago with hopes for the future, and, uh . . . well, maybe some of us can remember that, remember how we were back then, even if things didn't turn out like anyone planned."

Rav hardly expected his audience to clap, not after he had meandered off like that. He leaned back in his chair before the silence could prove embarrassing. "Anything else you want me to say?" he asked Daffyd.

"Thank you, that's all for now. Are we all cheered up, then?" The SecOp studied the faces in front of him. "This could go either way, folks. You needed to be reminded of that. Hell, there are people back on Earth who never have any adventures their whole lives! And maybe God chose us for this. Or maybe not, who knows? But let's all do our jobs, if only for the sake of each other these next days. If you have trouble going to sleep tonight, MedOp Julio has pills you can take. Any other business?"

The meeting went on another fifteen minutes, and then came to an end. Rav left the council room, found a nearby workstation, swished a wombug off the chair, and logged in.

He brought up A:SEEBALLET and deleted the *enlistment campaign*. Why blame their troubles on the government? There was enough of that already, enough to force a vote of no confidence and throw out the Liberty Coalition. Suppose CanAm broke up into constituent states and provinces! He certainly didn't want to contribute to anything like that.

*We signed up because we had problems with Earth. For me it was seeing downtown Winnipeg utterly demolished*

for urban renewal, my friends scattered and the whole arts community I'd lived among as a student wiped out, so rows of bland towerblocks could be put up—you see, nobody does anything for just one reason, but a lot of reasons put together might add up and put you over the line so you enlist, and once you enlist it's too late to change your mind.

We had positive reasons, too. If life could be planted on Jupiter, and it could prosper, Jupiter would soon be the most important place in the solar system, because it's so big! That was how I felt about the Jupitat. Speaking as a microbiologist, it was a prototype "cell" of Earthly life. Our libraries and databanks are the equivalent of DNA, and our housing and gear is the equivalent of enzymes and proteins. We humans do the same job as RNA inside a cell. We're the analysts, resource managers, and artisans. If Jupiter's atmosphere could be mined for materials, a special floating factory could create new and better Jupitats, and our children could move into them.

This sounds like we were bent on conquering Jupiter. But we'd have dropped the idea of building new Jupitats if Jupiter had indigenous life that used the same resources we were after. No threats, no bullying necessary—we'd have been nice about it. Something was going on down here, we knew that. Some system of chemical transformation was stealing most all the water from this cloud deck, and creating strange compounds: Carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide shouldn't exist under Jovian conditions. Something was stealing sulfur from the second cloud deck, and introducing phosphine. All these clouds were full of colors that were byproducts of that unknown system. If it turned out that the system was self-sustaining . . . well, who knows where life begins? Who knows when to stop sticking "lysis" at the end of words, and start sticking "bolism" instead?

Rav leaned back. Who knew anything? Who knew if Meilin would truly give up playing nun, or whether girlfriend Carol would warn her off: "Rav's a sex maniac. He just doesn't want to die before scoring on every woman in the Jupitat." The damned thing was, the way she'd say it wouldn't even be offensive!

He frowned. Why were the worms moving their whole show—colosseum and Jupitat—to the edge of the north tropical zone's cloud-band? That was a risky place for them, right? Turbulent, the far frontier of their own map, beyond which "here be monsters." The sun shone down through a wide gap in cloud deck two like a wall of light: that latitude was a permanent weather front girdling the planet.

It had never been hard to understand Jovian motivations before; they were screaming xenophobes. How was he going to talk about this to Seeba, and all the other middle-school kids back on Earth?

*Here's a good place to begin telling you about our troubles. We were a probe, and we'd just settled in to work at our destination level, when bang we got swallowed up inside an electromagnetic flux tube—imagine our little Christmas-tree bulb of a place trapped inside a great big*

*ionic tornado. But don't worry too much. The tornado wasn't deadly to us. It wasn't even as strong as the Jovian magnetosphere, but we couldn't talk to our orbital relay station, so we were cut off from Earth and totally isolated from the rest of humanity.*

Now you know that while this was happening, the "Jovians" were grudgingly opening up a buzzline to Earth, and teaching your experts enough basic language to understand their baby-talk threats and protests, but we knew nothing of the sort. We missed all the excitement. We thought that what had happened to us was a natural phenomenon, and would continue forever. We'd die in isolation.

That was the worst time of all for us. We didn't know that diplomats on Earth were making counter-threats in our behalf, until the day the flux tube switched off, and we could talk again. (By the way, we use Earth days, and an Earth calendar. The sun makes too little difference here for us to pay attention to local time.)

We were supposed to tell you on Earth about possible life on Jupiter, but when our communications window opened up, you told us instead. All sorts of clues were embedded in the "Jovian" language, like instead of singular and plural verbs, the fact that they had forms for not-many and more-than-fourteen, so you had weird clues to what life was like in the bell-bot cloud deck a few hundred kilometers below our feet.

One thing the Earth diplomats were very sure of. The instinctive utter hostility of the Jovians meant that the planet had more than one ecosystem. On Earth, Gaia is our mother—all our life shares nearly the same genetic code, and the same need for liquid water. We use the same twenty amino acids. We're composed of huge molecules that come together by virtue of hydrogen bonds and van der Waals bonds. These bonds can't be important at the high temperatures the Jovians live in, so they're not like us—and they're not like other systems of life they've had to contend with. Jupiter is so big that perhaps every band from pole to pole has its own dominant Gaia, born at a different temp/pressure level. Every time two Gaia's touch, the result is regional genocide. They're poisonous to each other.

"So you can't really blame them for being xenophobic," Rav muttered, dropping his arms into the water to gather strength for another paragraph.

Carol laid a hand on his shoulder, and he turned, startled. "Talking to yourself, huh?" she asked with a smile.

He rationed himself to a quick glance at her sturdy paleolithic figure, foreshortened by the water that bore her up. "Just working on a letter. It might be our last major communique to the ordinary people of Earth. It's like making history. I wish I had Arne's literary talents."

"How long before the Jovians finish their bubble and have us completely trapped?" she asked.

"You think we could squirt off now? Drop some mass and go up another kilometer? That's all evasion has done for us. It's put us at the top of our design altitude," Rav answered, turning back to his screen.

"How long?" Carol repeated. She slid her hand to the back of his neck. An affectionate threat. She increased the pressure.

"Twelve more hours," Rav conceded. "Maybe a little longer."

"And the way they've made their own Hardness Fourteen bubble proves they've got the Hardness Fifteen tools to break ours. Leon told me that. You'd better hurry, or you'll never get into Meilin's nonexistent pants before the end comes."

Rav didn't want to talk about Meilin. *What ever happened to privacy?* "The worms'll force a small break," he said. "We'll let a handful of our wombbugs out, and plug it up."

"You're so sure? Did Daffyd's pep rally convince you of that?"

Rav swung back again, forcing Carol to paddle to a new footing. "They're moving us to the edge of their provincial little universe, and that's going to take some extra time," he said. "I haven't put all the pieces together, but I think we'll be left alive until we get there."

Carol shrugged. "This eco-war we're getting geared up for—is that going to start tomorrow, or not? Are we going to win? *Should* we win? We're more than nominal Christians now, after all we've been through. Didn't we decide our only hope was to be other than xenophobic ourselves? Maybe even to turn the other cheek?"

"To lose on purpose. Why?"

Carol stepped closer, and dropped her voice. "Because we've already got our own complete planet all to ourselves, and these poor Jovians only have a small share of theirs! One zone out of eleven! If they win, maybe they'll loosen up. It's like when strangers meet. One side has to take the lead in putting down its weapons."

Rav shook his head. "They'd never understand us. All they've ever understood are threats. Anyhow, this is science. You're talking like some mass could decide not to obey the first law of thermodynamics for ethical reasons. It's absurd. How do you tell viruses to pull their punches?"

"Wake up," Carol said. "Stop playing games. You tell them the same way you tell your eukaryotes to use a new brand of hemoglobin. You tweak their DNA to make us seem mild and feeble. 'Blessed are the meek.'"

Rav put out his hand to divert a swimming wombbug before it hit his chest. "Weren't you at the meeting a half-hour ago? You could have said something then."

"And you were at services Sunday morning. What did you think my sermon was about?" Carol asked. "How many times I've spoken my heart! Daffyd would squash me if I got in his way, but he doesn't have to know. Not if you do the right thing. Did we really come all this way just to pollute our neighbors' world with Earthly biota? Didn't we take an oath *not* to do that, if we found out that Jupiter had life?"

"That was before . . . well, you know."

"But you remember. You remember how we were. Think what you're doing now."

Rav sighed impatiently. "What I'm doing now is writing a letter to a smart young girl in Chicago, and if I could only finish, I might think about other things."

"Like Meilin? I have a message. She'll be waiting for you, Rav. Down in Level Three this time, seventeen hundred hours. I'm her friend. Don't do her like you did me."

With these words, Carol swam off. Rav sucked on his lip for a half-minute, and then went on.

*So you can't blame the Jovians for being xenophobic. They have every reason to be, and here we've come, adding to their problems. But if we're to stay alive in the long run (your diplomats warned us), we'd have to develop some kind of weapon. Something that would infest a big area, and make an ecological stink if they smashed our bubble, so that it was worth the Jovians' while to leave us intact.*

*We were obliged to follow a policy made back on Earth, a policy meant to safeguard our lives. Your diplomats had already warned the Jovians that we had a weapon, so we had to make their words come true. From the Jovian point of view, the whole reason we were back in radio contact was so our "leaders" on Earth could order us not to release our "deadly wombbugs."*

*We immediately set out to build ourselves some deadly wombbugs. It was lucky that we knew what our Earth friends were talking about.*

*They're the size of baby turtles, and we replicated thousands of them—nowadays they crawl about everywhere inside the Juptiat on various kinds of legs, like pets. They have little AI brains, and hundreds of thousands of DNA nucleides inside their jewel-body carapaces. They can edit this raw material to make just about anything that seems appropriate. Primitive stuff first: anaerobic life. Prokaryotic cells. And certainly viruses.*

*Jupiter may turn out very hostile to our wombbug products. Against all the Gaeas that evolved here, I'd never put my money on an imported goddess from puny Earth. But the Jovians hate taking risks. They won't attack unless they're sure they'll win. We figured they wouldn't break our bubble to kill us, not once we radioed Earth to say we're keeping our wombbugs around.*

*After we took our precautions, we settled down and had our golden age. No more suicides. Some of us even talked about children—a few of the women were still in their early forties. I'm glad they chose not to, because all of a sudden the good years are over. The Jovians have finally trumped us. They've kept far distant until now, and made sure we're ignorant about life in our local neighborhood, but they've had to change their ways to begin building their own super-bubble.*

*We can see it whenever we look out our windows. The artifact is ten kilometers wide, and it'll swallow us completely. When that happens and we're safely isolated from the outside environment, the majority assumption is they'll attack our bubble and shatter it, killing us, and releasing our "deadly wombbugs" into a test lab where they can see whether their Gaea is poisonous to ours, or ours is to theirs. A controlled experiment. I only wish I could stay alive to learn the outcome.*

*You asked me to describe the Jovians. Well, the things they live in look like how El Greco would paint a pipe*

*organ if his astigmatism had gotten worse. Organ-tubes grow clustered out of a gently-rippling base, half squirt bulb and half jellyfish, everything colored an unhappy mix of grunge and scuzz. The individual pipes have caps that pop open. Wormy things flash out and dither around and burry back in, no doubt bitching about how cold it is up here. Our love-worm enemies are twenty-thirty meters long, with hair tufts at both ends and a row of cilia on each side for swimming. I'd describe their color as blotch, which is what you get when you mix olive and white.*

*As for scale, the pipe-organism clusters are each the size of a large building, and the bulbous bases are middle-sized truck farms, fifty hectares or so in area. No, not truck farms. Imagine miniature moons badly paved with rectangular plate-armor, with small bushes and trees that might be parasites growing on them, pulsing and squoshing. We're surrounded by the things. I'd like to have enough of an open mind to describe these critters as beautiful, but I'm afraid it's beyond me. Jovians have no use for eyes. Colors make no difference to them, and that explains the uninteresting pigmentation.*

Rav leaned back. Six pages single-spaced, and when would he come to the end? Pretty soon, because there wasn't much else to say. *That's where we stand now, and tomorrow?* What was Meilin doing down in Level Three anyhow? He logged off and launched for the elevators.

Level Three; thermal power converters, CycOps, Pathology and biomass storage. Rav swam the hallways, waiting for Meilin's ambush. "So, are you worth half a shit, Doctor Mishra?" she said from the dark, once he'd paddled past her.

"More than half," he answered.

Meilin switched on the light. "Carol says you're just going through the motions. You used to feel a certain penile urgency, but now it's not even that."

"Penile urgencies are for sixteen-year-olds. Where are we? The morgue?"

Meilin looked around, as if this room was new to her. "We can dry off on the slabs. We can remember our young past, when we lived free of water. And we can talk about a later past, maybe."

"Which one? How many phases *baven't* we gone through in twenty years?" Rav asked.

"When we were out of touch, cut off from Earth. When Arne committed suicide."

"And Daffyd became a Christian existentialist," Rav added. "A lot of people did the one thing, and a lot of survivors did the other."

"You and me too," Meilin said. "Help me up. Give me a shove—good. How do I look? Squashed, I think. Naked, yes? I never feel naked under water. Water is a kind of clothing."

Meilin's skin was as youthful and taut as a teenager's. Wet and hairless, she had the mirror finish of flesh-colored plastic. Once she propped up to give him room, Rav hauled to her side, and caught his breath.

"I don't know what happened to the existentialism," he said, hurrying his words. "I believed in that, but as

for the rest of it? It just became—well, *church*. Sacraments and sermons, and couples swearing chastity. You know, if I were really the lowlife Carol thinks I am, I'd have come onto you while you were still with Daffyd. Or afterward when I thought you were trying to be a nun."

"Aw! So sorry my vows set you back," Meilin mocked. "And you took yourself to all those other women for comfort in your despair."

"What is this, thrust and parry? Twenty years we've had for playing games."

Meilin gave him a kiss. "You were always afraid of Daffyd. That's the truth. We two have all the same fears."

"Like tomorrow." Rav leaned carefully, and pulled her into a close embrace.

"Tomorrow," she answered.

Later they slid into the water and made final love.

"Carol was wrong," Meilin said afterward.

"She talked to me before I came down here. She wants us to lose," Rav answered. "Maybe we die in eight hours, and all our viruses and germs and bugs too, and that's it for Jupiter. A tidy finish to our mission."

"It's enough. We should rejoice that there is life here," Meilin said. "Not our kind of life, but why are we taking sides anyhow? Rah, rah, we win. Posthumously, of course."

"Did you monkey with your prokaryotes? One way or the other?" Rav asked. "To make them weaker?"

"As if I knew what counted for strength!" Meilin said, turning her head away. "It's going to happen the way it happens. There's no time anyhow. Maybe Carol doesn't understand that. Oh, you, with your eukaryotes—you've got time, but it's my germs that the contest is riding on."

"Are you going to try and get some sleep?" Rav asked.

"I don't know. What about you?"

"I've got a letter to finish and transmit. I don't think I can sleep. I don't think I want to."

Rav was thoroughly fatigued by the time he set down to a terminal eight hours later.

*Much time has passed, Seeba. The best news this morning is that the Jovians didn't weigh down their bubble before finishing it. We won't be "subducted" into ever-increasing heat and darkness. The not-so-good news is that they did finish it, and just before they locked the last panel in place, in swam this grotesque thing with gill-clouds on its sides, and a snout like a cannon. We've gotten a close look at it because it's come up to our Jupitat. It's been tapping around, probably using ecolocation to decide the best place to break us open. Of course it doesn't have eyes, or much that you'd call a face, just a front end.*

*I'm part of team six. It's our job to patch any damage this beast does to us if he attacks Level Six, and fire a few of our wombbugs out as a counterattack. I'd better transmit this letter now. If I can, I'll send a postscript to tell you what this creature does to us, and what happens next.*

Rav stood and swam to the council room to join the rest of his team. Meilin passed out energy bars, and he ate



his while staring out the window. "What's it doing now? Getting instructions?"

"It's anyone's guess," Leon answered. "A projectile snout, wouldn't you say? It can't swim fast enough to damage us by ramming."

"So we'll be killed by a giant booger," Meilin laughed shortly. "I'd agree. It's manufacturing the necessary explosive charge; some kind of retrodigestive process that's got to be taxing its constitution."

"Plus the thing's working in what it considers ultra-low temperatures," Rav said. "Say, what if it dies before accomplishing its mission? They'd have to open the colosseum to let another one inside, or can they do that?"

"Yeah," Leon answered. "But not after we deploy our wombbugs. If we did that now, and our viruses killed the thing. . . ." His eyes widened.

Team six looked at each other in astonished hope. Meilin got on the intercom to Daffyd. "Why wait to be damaged?" she said. "They've got their microbiota out there. Let's send ours out, and the contest is on."

"What about the rules? We're only supposed to use wombbugs in self-defense," Daffyd answered.

"Whose rules? Earth's? Our impression of Earth's impression of what's fair? Everybody knows what the colosseum is for. Let's get on with it."

"But the ethics—"

"Look, Daffyd, this is a science experiment. Both sides need to know the answer," Rav interrupted. "Let's go ahead, before that monster loses patience and snots off at us."

*. . . so we decided to release our wombbugs into the colosseum, our biota versus theirs, and the creature beld quiet for it, which is our only way of determining that the Jovians wanted us to remain inside an undamaged Jupiter for the time being. I suppose Leon's right. We're meant to report back to Earth, and confirm the bad news that our prokaryotes folded up in the face of environmental conditions out there.*

*Well, really, could anyone expect otherwise? Though our wombbugs hatched out tens of thousands of species, the best we can say is that some few that immediately curled into defensive spores haven't yet been eaten, although they're clearly edible.*

*The snout-monster died and has begun falling to pieces, but most likely the cold did that, or lack of food. We're not sure now that it ever had the power to do more than knock at our windows, and ask us to come out and play.*

*This is my first postscript, but now what? We're still floating on a course that's going to take us out of the "Jovians" home zone, and into another ecosystem, if we make it across the storm-wall in between.*

*Have they decided to let us live, now that we've proven to be harmless wimps? But they still can't stand to have us around? The fact is, they'd already started pushing us south before the issue was decided.*

*If the Jovians follow precedent, they'll contact you on Earth to explain themselves, or make further threats, or brag. And then you'll tell us. Until then, we'll be poring*

*over the data our exiled wombbugs are lasering in to us, and learning a thousand times more than we ever knew before about the biology of our enemies. Maybe that's a victory enough, to make up for today's defeat.*

Once he transmitted his postscript, Rav shelved his ComL B role for the next many hours, and went to his mBioG laboratory. Hours later he turned from his screens, went for a brief swim-break and found Meilin the next room over, quietly busy at her own station. "I took your answer for a 'no,'" he said. "No, you didn't tamper to weaken our prokaryotes. No Christian sabotage. You weren't working with Carol."

"Carol's a friend of mine," Meilin answered. "A steady friend, not like you come-and-go men." When Rav hadn't replied after another minute went by, she went on:

"We're still alive. Do you think we'd be alive if Earth viruses and germs had proven superior?"

"I'm looking at Jovian macromolecules, and shaking my head at their poverty," he said. "The way they've fudged around the absence of *this* and the lack of *that*. Clever, desperately clever, the way they've made do. If we'd killed them and digested them into fragments, I wouldn't be standing here in admiration."

Rav turned to stare at her. "So you did it. Maybe you even sacrificed your virtue to keep me distracted and away from my lab. Blessed are the meek. Turn the other cheek. Walk the second mile."

"We're hostages here," Meilin answered. "It wouldn't have done Earth credit to sacrifice us, but we could dare to sacrifice ourselves. It's our risk to take, to break the cycle of tooth and claw."

Rav found a chair. "Suppose the Jovians decide to destroy us on the strength of what's happened today. Our real biota will get loose out there."

"If I did what I did in obedience to God, then the future is in God's hands," Meilin said. She turned from her screens to face him. "You look tired."

"I'm going to sleep now. I've got a bunk here. Wake me up when the word comes."

"What word? From whom?"

"Any word at all," Rav answered. "Listen. You can hear the thunder, can't you? The lightnings of Jupiter, through all these walls and baffles, because we're coming to the edge of the north tropical zone. Off into the valley of storms and sunlight."

"And goodbye to our enemies," Meilin said. "Do you love them? At least you admire their molecules."

"What's that syndrome, where hostages love their captors?" Rav asked. "I wish I knew it were a goodbye with a future afterward. For now—goodnight."

Rav woke to see Meilin at his bunkside, unlatching his head-cradle. He tilted into the water and rinsed his face. She bent to give him a kiss, and pointed to the overhead.

*Dear Dr. Mishra,*

*Thanks for your letter and here's the news. They thought I should tell you right away and I am in the principals office—It's okay! Those bad Jovians are laugh-*

*ing after your fight with them because they're tougher than our kind of life and they're going to use you as pests to bother their neighbors, but, they would have destroyed you if they thought you could ever be pests to them! So you should be happy because it means your going to stay alive. We think—I mean the guys here with me think maybe the neighbors zone don't have any intelligent life forms because what's the odds on that? Well we don't know. So anyhow the TV cameras are watching me type this and my teacher is fixing up my spelling and making a fuss and it's all going to be on the news tonight. Everybody is happy about you all still being there and sending*

*all that science data stream stuff. And please send more postscripts anytime you like. I'm going to grow up and study microbiology in college just like you but I don't think they'll send me to Jupiter! Saturn maybe!!*

Rav turned his head. "What's all that noise?" he asked.

"More thunder. Come on, let's get out of this dark room. Come to the windows," Meilin said. "It's so bright! So bright you can see colors, even!"

An hour later the Jupitair reached the edge, and drifted out into free sunlight. ♦

## Ready . . . Aim . . . Write!

If you're a reader of this magazine with something to say, and you're willing to share your thoughts in writing, we want to hear from you. Please don't hesitate to send us a letter or a postcard—we do read every piece of mail we receive, and we try to respond as often and as promptly as we can.

**Comments on the magazine and its content** are especially welcome now that AMAZING® Stories is coming out in a full-size, full-color format—we want to find out what you think of the new look. If it's not what you expected, then what *did* you expect? Which stories and features did you like, and which ones could you do without? The feedback we get will play an important role in shaping the future of the magazine. To help us separate readers' comments from other mail we receive, please write "Letter to the Editor" in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope.

As much as we would enjoy reading compliments, we're even more interested in criticism—so if you have a negative reaction to something about this magazine, don't keep it to yourself. Before we can fix a problem, we have to be told that it *is* a problem.

We will consider any letter of comment and criticism to be eligible for publication, unless you specifically say in your letter that you *don't* want it printed. An unsigned letter will not be considered for publication, but we will withhold a writer's name on request. If you give us your full mailing address when you write and your letter is printed, we'll send you a complimentary issue of the magazine in which it appears.

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# Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

The desert vegetation behind the Hopi Cultural Center Motel looked more mineral than vegetable, Cherrill thought—the leaves were muted turquoise on top, furred silver below; the branches, knobbed and covered in lizardlike skin, felt like vinyl constructs. He walked away across the pebbled ground as the sun climbed above the horizon to his right. The head-high spindly plants surrounded him. Odd up close, they resembled smoke haze from a distance, like no cactus he had ever heard of.

A gentle slope slowed him, and he paused, then sat on the ground between the mineral trees. He looked back through their living mist at the motel, a

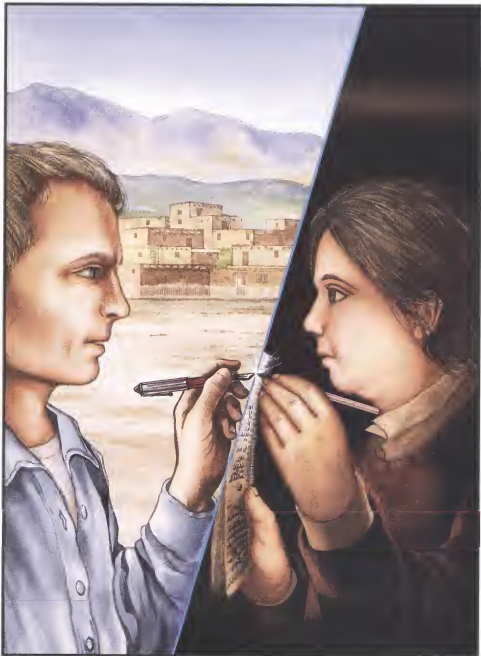


Illustration by Hannah M. G. Shapero

collection of cinderblock boxes painted to look like adobe but resembling children's blocks. The small square windows looked crayon-black in the sunrise. In one of those rooms Fran slept, a silent object with the contained energy of a locomotive.

He felt tired. He ran his fingers through the pebbles beside him, trying to channel his upset into the cool, gritty earth. Twelve years of marriage, and this was *his* first trip. Every previous spring break they pooled what was left from their teachers' salaries after living expenses and went to Hawaii, Fran's choice. Cherrill found Hawaii historyless, its patina of native culture as thin as the topsoil on a newly formed volcanic island. At last they had come to Old Oraibi, in Arizona's Hopiland, where people had been living a thousand years, working and reworking the threads of their beliefs.

Their visit to the actual village yesterday had not been successful. A sign beside the rutted dirt road leading into the village forbade trespassing and cameras without permission of the tribal leader.

Cherrill had stopped the car beside the fence, climbed out, and stood under the desert sun, wondering if this was the place of his dreams, the end of his quest. The oldest continuously inhabited settlement in the United States sat just the other side of some barbed wire, and looked as silent and empty as the ruined cliff dwellings in Canyon de Chelly. Squared stone buildings stood knee-deep in age-old dust like organic extensions of the mesa rock itself. A slat-sided dog rose up from a puddle of dust and wiped away.

After a moment's silent contemplation, Cherrill felt fulfilled. He got back into the car.

"Go ask someone for permission to go in," Fran said as Cherrill backed the rented Sprint and turned it around. "Ask! We came all the way here, across the deadliest country I have ever seen, just to see this—this Emerald City of yours—and you're not even going to knock on the gate?"

He stared at her as the dust settled on the car. The engine purred in the desert silence. Cherrill leaned back and closed his eyes, pushing against the steering wheel until his elbows locked. She didn't understand. How often had these people been invaded and betrayed? He didn't want to be just another pushy white tourist, trying to lay claim to their cultural heritage—and yet . . .

"So it's the same story all over again, Walter," Fran said as they drove out to the highway. "You plot and plan to get something, you sneak and push toward it, and then at the last minute you turn back—and spend all your energy blaming me because your nerve failed. Right? Right?"

As usual, he remained silent under her accusations, hoping that if he didn't respond to them, he wouldn't remember them, though past experience demonstrated the opposite. They drove from Third Mesa to Second Mesa, where they discovered the Hopi Cultural Center, and he had insisted on checking into the motel.

He drew in the morning with each breath, enjoying the chill, clean taste of the air. His fingers slowed on the earth beside him. Perhaps he could not touch the walls

of ancient buildings, see the secret altars inside the kivas, witness the dance of the kachinas, or talk with people who lived woven into a cocoon of such rich tradition. Still, he had seen Old Oraibi with his own eyes, felt the weight there of countless footsteps taken in the past. He had made a desert memory to take home to the wet Oregon Coast spring, where he and Fran would return too soon, back to teaching high-school writing courses.

Walking this little distance into the desert had calmed him. The desert was quiet, its life sparse but thrilling, so different from Hawaii, which burgeoned with rude, loud greenery. He had a sense that most of the life here took place underground, that the desert was alive with ghosts; he felt kinship with it.

Fran would be looking for him soon. She had opened her eyes while he dressed, mumbled a question, seemed to sleep through his answer. She would probably be waking up for real any minute.

He braced himself to push up to his feet. His right hand landed on something foreign. It was larger than the pebbles, and straight; even before glancing at it, he sensed it was filled with intention. For a moment he hoped the desert had given him a gift. Then he looked.

It was a fountain pen, and not even an antique one. He felt a faint disgust that even here, in a place which should be sacred to the elements and the weather, one found the discards of civilization. He examined the pen. It had a clear red plastic barrel and a silvery metal cap. He could see an empty cartridge inside.

He frowned, stood up, and tucked the pen in his shirt pocket. A fountain pen—Fran's province. She used them for everything, even though they bled on her possessions and her fingers, even though the ink washed away at the touch of water. Cherrill did his first drafts and his notes in ball-point, then went to the typewriter, ignoring Fran's claims that free-flowing ink and free-flowing thought went together. She might be working on her vacation project right now; she claimed designing a curriculum lab for teaching Hawthorne's short fiction was the only thing keeping her sane in this desolate country, anyway.

They both worked on projects during vacation, but hers generally sold and his didn't. She had some strange facility that seemed to latch onto what editors and administrators wanted before anybody else knew.

"Walter? Walter, where are you?"

Oh, God, she would wake the whole complex. He sprinted down to the hotel, the pen forgotten.

She smiled when he arrived. He felt his shoulders untensing as he checked her outfit. Yellow slacks, a loose green blouse, and flat-soled sandals—yes, the tone for the day was relaxation. She wore her coppery hair loose. "Let's go to breakfast," she said. "Maybe we can do some writing in the courtyard afterwards."

In the coffee shop which was part of the complex, Cherrill ordered blue cornmeal pancakes for breakfast, while Fran ordered what she always did: bacon, eggs, dry wheat toast, orange juice and coffee. She wore her teacher face all through the meal—bright, expectant, smiling. When she put on that face and silkened her

voice, her pupils wrote amazing compositions and poems, sometimes winning prizes in statewide competitions.

Cherrill almost never managed to inspire his students that way. When he and Fran, fresh from college and their honeymoon, came to the coast for their first jobs, he had been full of idealism, ready to open up the world of literature to culturally impoverished adolescents. That spirit had leaked away in two years; now, he used the same set of exercises every year, modifying them if he read an article or heard of a suggestion that piqued his interest. He saw too many listless loggers' children, who knew enough not to learn more than their eighth-grade-educated parents had. A few oddballs kept him awake each year, but the deadening act of talking to a roomful of closed faces drained him of enthusiasm. He *had* started a chess club during lunch period—the brightest kids in school came in and played games and gossiped, so his noon hour was his happiest hour, aside from the prep period, when the young science teacher came in and they matched wits across a chessboard themselves.

Fran wanted to move on to a bigger school in a city somewhere, with a bigger budget, more stimulating atmosphere, more students, more excitement. Some of the outlying districts of Portland liked to hire husband-and-wife teaching teams in the hope that they would settle down. Every time Fran heard about such an opening, she badgered him into applying, but they never made the final interview.

Cherrill watched her drawing information out of the waitress. He closed his eyes a moment and tasted the blue pancakes. They had more texture than regular pancakes, but the difference in taste was slight. He tried to sense the history of the grain, the foundation of Hopi life. In his mind, there was an image of a brown child standing on the edge of a cliff as the sun rose far across the desert. Cool morning colors, strong blue shadows; the child cast a scatter of cornmeal out over the dropoff, singing a song to greet the new day.

Every act a celebration.

"Walter? See what happens when you get up too early? Don't fall asleep on me now. Finish breakfast, and let's get some writing done."

The central court of the complex had green grass growing in it, unnatural in this climate, and a cement patio with scattered tables and chairs. Cherrill took one of Fran's ink cartridges from the desk in their room when they went back to get their materials. He brought it, his notebook, and his copy of *Huckleberry Finn* outside.

They picked a table and chairs still in shadow, and sat down. The spring morning's cool touched him still; the courtyard smelled of lawn. Fran bent her head over her clipboard. She sucked on her pen, then started writing.

Cherrill retrieved the pen he had found that morning from his shirt pocket. He unscrewed the nib, replaced the cartridge, then primed the pen with spit until ink flowed from the point, the way he had seen Fran do a hundred times. The old cartridge said "Peacock Blue" on it.

"Who was your owner?" he whispered to the pen, smiling a little. Fran never wrote in any color but "Deluxe Blue-Black."

Glancing up, Fran said, "A fountain pen, Walter? Where did you get that?"

"I found it in the desert."

She smiled. "Ah ha," she said, and bent over her work again.

He opened his notebook. All the pages were blank. He chewed on his lower lip, then wrote "HUCKLEBERRY FINN—CHAMELEON" across the top line. He put his hand across the words. Fran would inform him it had been done before—he hated telling her his ideas; she inevitably deflated them. After a little mental cringing, he began to write.

"Who is the real Huckleberry Finn? How can anyone who assumes a new identity in every new situation know who he really is, especially if he has to live inside that identity for any length of time, then switch it when the wind blows change?"

"With the present prevalence of role-playing games, Twain's classic has new dimensions of meaning for today's high-school student . . ."

Fran had done all her queuing in the *Unabridged Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* before they left for vacation. She had photocopied every article pertinent to her topic, and had probably blocked out her basic curriculum strategy, choosing which pieces students should confront in one quarter and picking the direction the teacher should take. By the time they got home, she would have a complete work, ready to type and send off; with luck, the *English Journal* would buy it. He looked at her bowed head, at the sun that had crept forward to gild the edges of her hair. The pen in her hand flowed across the lined paper on her clipboard, leaving words behind. Misery swamped him.

He looked back at his notebook—and gasped. There was another paragraph on the page, but the writing wasn't his. The loops were wider and taller than those of his tight-fisted, meticulous hand.

When I write my name on a steamed mirror, only my name reflects; the rest is just a blur of colors. I wish I was that sharp image. But when my name reflects, it does not reflect me. She looks out of the mirror from the letters of my name. I can't see myself at all, no matter how fat I get.

He felt his last breath beating against his lungs as he held it in. He put the pen and notebook on the table and slowly let out his breath.

"Another page down," said Fran, jubilant. "This is my best work yet, Walter. Thank God for something in the midst of this wasteland!"

He took shallow breaths and stared at the page again, running his gaze across the words, tracing the loops and flourishes. So it had finally happened. He was going crazy.

What a relief.

"Finally got started, huh? Well, good. I thought maybe you wouldn't get anything done, and then you'd pout the rest of the trip."

He looked at her and smiled, remembering the first

time he'd seen her—lying on the lawn at Reed College with the most ferocious scowl on her face, staring at a fat green Victorians textbook, which went with a class for which he had just registered. He had felt pleased to see a woman who looked like she had an opinion about something. Most of the girls he had talked to seemed so faded, as if they missed some vital nutrient, and were living below subsistence level.

"See? You feel better already," she said. "Get it down, and you won't feel like this trip has been a total waste."

Cherrill picked up the notebook and pen again. Her words felt knife-sharp in him. He told himself the trip had not been a waste, not in the secret recesses of his soul; he had seen a desert sunrise and tasted blue cornmeal, seen Old Oraibi outside the confines of a photograph. But as usual, her words were stronger than his memories.

How I wish I could leave her. I wish I could walk away across the desert and into a dream, and never come back. Oh, Diary, sometimes I pretend that I am strong and whole, that I can take care of myself and support myself. That I can get away from her. It is a dream with so much quiet and solitude in it. I imagine fixing myself tea, and sipping it slowly, not having to make conversation at all.

But if I left . . . if I left, Diary, it would be like a body walking away from its bones. How far can a lump of jelly get?

Cherrill dropped the pen. His hand shook. Whose silent voice was this? His own? He remembered feeling trapped in childhood, longing to run away from his family, but feeling too strong a debt to his sister, who took care of him and his brother every time their father left and their mother fell to pieces—an event that happened at least once a month.

"Are you all right, Walter? You didn't get food poisoning from that weird breakfast, did you?"

Was that it? Eat, breathe, dream in a foreign culture, open oneself to foreign ghosts? But the pen was writing in English.

He bent to retrieve it, then sat back in his chair. He gripped the pen, then put large loose crosshatches through the alien paragraphs and began to write.

"In the course of Twain's book, Huck takes on numerous identities, starting from the very first chapter, where he is trying to become the good, pious child the Widow Douglas so desperately desires. This role, farther from his inner self than any other he adopts in the course of the book, is the only one that defies him completely."

He turned the page over, glad to be able to look at clean white paper, without the disturbing words in front of him. He opened the copy of *Huckleberry Finn*, checking to see if his memory was still working. But even as he flipped past the preface and introductory remarks with his left hand, his right hand tightened on the pen. This time he watched as his hand clutched the pen and set it gliding.

At home I have ways of hiding; I can always check the house from a distance, and find out where she is in it, and go in some other door, hoping she won't hear me. At home she has other people around to distract her. The current foreign exchange student living with us is from Japan. He talks to her during supper, and that takes some of the pressure off me. I am so afraid to be alone with her. Yet she invited me on this trip with her and I said yes. Because it doesn't matter where I go, she comes with me. I hear her voice in my head criticizing everything I do. In a way it's a relief to be with the real her, because the real her is sometimes nice, and the phantom her never is.

Oh, Diary. Does everybody see their mother in their mirrors?

LATER. She called me a fat slob tonight. "Do you think I like it, when I have to introduce you, 'Here's my daughter, this fat slob, she has no will power, no control?'" etc. How she gave up calcium and muscle tone to create me, the perfect child, and now I am destroying myself, the gift she gave me. How she was never serious about it before—"When you were younger I thought you'd get over it, I said, 'It's just adolescence'; when you went away to high school I thought you'd get over it. When you went to the university I thought you'd see how things were, and change. But now I see you're a serious addict. If you were on heroin, I'd have you put in jail! You let food run your life." And so forth.

It just seems to me it's odd how history repeats itself. I have a journal entry from when I was ten years old:

"Mommy called me a fat pig tonight."

Here's to nine years of harping on the same string.

"Wow, you're really writing, Walter," said Fran. "What did I tell you? A fountain pen is the only way to get any work done."

Cherrill shook his head, waking from the dream. Her name, he thought, was Kim.

For a moment he wanted to stand up and run away, drop the pen and stamp on it like he would on a scorpion, chase even the chance of mystery out of his life; to get out his typewriter, force his essay out onto paper and suffer Fran's attention as he always did, welcoming and despising it. At the base of his spine he felt the touch of something cold and intangible. He put the pen down on the table and flexed his fingers, rereading what Kim had written.

Kim. A hitherto unsuspected creative side of himself? Or somebody with her own existence?

Company?

He put his hand on the page again.

THE NEXT MORNING. She only keeps bringing up this subject because she cares about me and she hates to see me destroying myself. She hates seeing



me waste my youth. She wants me to realize my full potential. She wants to see me attractive, desirable, and feminine, to be a whole woman, to have lovers, children, possibly a marriage—

"If I see my daughter running over a cliff, I'll try to pull her back even if she kills me while I do it. I'd die for any of my children, you know that."

She only wants me to be a better her, and I keep failing.

He capped the pen and put it down. The fear he had felt at first was leaving him, even though logical explanations had deserted him. This was not the silent self of his teen years, finding a voice at last. It was some other child lost in the shadow of a parent. Her name was Kim, he thought, and wondered how he knew.

He remembered an exercise he had given his writing classes during his first year. "One morning you wake up and look into a mirror, and the face you see there isn't yours. Whose is it? What is that person or thing doing there? What happens next?" Several boys came up with alternate universes into which they were pulled; some saw aliens.

The girls' imaginations seemed more frightening. Four out of seven girls in the class had had murderers reach through the mirror and kill them, and those four didn't even sit near each other.

The exercise disturbed him; he didn't teach it again.

How old was Kim? Old enough to go to college, and she was seeing an Other in the mirror when she hadn't even been given the assignment.

"You're not working, Walter," Fran said, frowning across the table at him.

He uncapped the pen and positioned his hand on the paper.

She watches everything I do. I think that's ironic; one of the best things she ever told me was, "When something's bothering you, you're watching it too closely." I don't eat all my potatoes, and I never order dessert unless she does, and sometimes not even then. She says that all my efforts are "Band-aids," that I have a serious problem I can't possibly solve myself, and I better promise her to take care of myself, or she'll stop giving me my allowance.

I wish I felt strong enough sometimes I wish she would stop giving me money but when it comes right down to it she always retracts the threats I have stared at those monthly checks sometimes, knowing them for chains. Paper you'd think would be easy enough to rip, but not when it has the weight of iron.

I wish I wish I thought I could get a job but I have no skills I can't imagine anybody hiring me to do anything. I feel worthless.

I wish I knew a secret code, Diary. She reads you if I forget to hide you. I try to keep you with me, but sometimes I leave you in the car.

I wish. I know there is a thing called anger, but it

is buried under the fat, Diary. With all the other feelings. If they ever, ever come out, I think I'll drown. Build the walls higher and hope the dam holds.

I feel like I'm living in a portable grave. Like a vampire, I carry my native soil with me everywhere. It's on my hips and my stomach, my face and my forearms.

This is what I've done for myself.

Cherrill threw the pen into the grass and shook his hand, trying to ease the tension in his fingers. He felt as if this child had taken him over, her will creeping up his arm and insinuating itself into his muscles; for a moment, he had even felt the black sun in her stomach, the imploding hunger that pulled everything to it; she was afraid it would turn outward, go nova, send out flares that ashed worlds, killing everything in their wake.

He rubbed his eyes and looked around, trying to bring himself into the reality of the moment, afraid of being trapped in a past—his own, and Kim's. She had seen that deadly anger unleashed and blazing. He had, too, seen his mother raging up and down the house, breaking glasses and dishes, kicking furniture, cursing her absent husband, lashing out at the children. "It's your fault he's gone. If you'd just stop whining all the time! If you had never been born, I could have kept my figure and he wouldn't be out chasing some secretary. I wish you'd all curl up and die!"

Each time she voiced the wish, he felt it happen inside—a tiny shriveling of some sliver of self—even though his sister tried to shield him. How happy he had been to get away to college. All the secret terrors melted into the faded shadows of a dream. Nobody else seemed to have experienced anything like it; in time, he came to believe it had never happened. He still had the conviction that many pieces of him were dead, though, and he quested through English literature in hopes that something would spark them alive again. Occasionally a poem struck him, or a story, touching some secret self, reanimating nerve centers he had thought dead. The flashes of life did not last.

"Walter?" Fran stood in front of him, holding out the red-and-silver pen. She cocked her head, looking down at his notebook, trying to read the words. He felt heat flush across his chest, rise in his face. He turned his notebook over so only a blank page showed.

"Don't be childish—" she said

—even as he realized his reaction had been Kim's—

"—we're collaborators, aren't we?" She picked up the notebook and turned it over. Her eyes moved back and forth, scanning the page. Her brows lowered, and he felt the sickening tightness in his stomach, the fear that someone would get angry and the world would end. Was it Kim's fear or his own? Here, in this false green oasis, amidst the barbed-wire-fenced ruins of a deeper past—the last breaths of an underground culture still struggling to stay alive, though everything around it tried to smother it—

Fran flipped the pages back, reading everything. She

frowned at the opening lines of his essay. Her eyes widened when she came to Kim's first entry, and he could almost see the fury gathering around her; it was yellow-orange, and flickered at her outer edges. As she read on, it damped down; her face lost expression. He clasped his hands across his stomach, wishing he could ease the knots forming there. Now, he thought, Kim thought, the end of the world, what a relief, we've spent too much energy trying to avoid this.

"What are you doing, Walter? What—at first I thought—but . . . what is this?"

His first impulse was to try to explain: he had found a pen, which seemed to have a resident spirit; he was remembering some soap opera or perhaps it was the trace memory from a book he had read twenty years ago; he was taking a stab at fiction—what did she think of the character development? Any of these explanations might calm her.

He was not sure if the hand that reached out for the notebook was his own or Kim's. Fear resonated in him like a plucked string. *How often do we defy her? Not often, and it makes things worse. Any action out of the ordinary sets her off, but so do ordinary actions, so what can we do?*

He took the notebook away from Fran. "It's none of your business."

"If you're going crazy, I think I have a right to know," she said.

The tiny diamond in her wedding ring sparkled as sunlight crept above the buildings and stabbed into the courtyard. He looked at her waiting face as sun touched it, startling color and life into what had been shadow. Her eyes had a green translucence that reminded him of opals, and her hair seemed not just to accept light, but to grasp it. If only time would stop, freeze them both into wordlessness. He loved the way she looked.

"Are you going crazy?"

"No."

"What *are* you doing? Those things you're writing—they're sick. They're pointless. They're not even in your own handwriting. At first I thought they were about me—are they? Is that how you feel?" Her voice held a curious mixture of pain and hope.

Closing his eyes, he tried to think of the right response—something to defuse the situation, make everything tame down to normal, before she slipped over the edge. Tell her it was a joke? A brief thought flashed—she wants them to be about her, because everything reflects on her—mirror, mirror—

"It's none of your business," he said again.

"None of my business that the man I love and live with, the man I made vows to, the other half of my life, is slipping over the edge?" she asked, and he jerked, startled by her phrasing, wondering if she had read his mind. "Walter—what's wrong? What's going on? It's this desert, isn't it? It would drive anybody crazy."

"This has nothing to do with the desert," he said, but he wondered. "Can't you just leave it alone?"

"Leaving something alone doesn't solve it. You have to confront it. You always run away from everything,

Walter—run away from work, from reality, from responsibility. Why can't you ever be strong?" Her voice rose, and she began to recite the usual litany. "You could do so much better if you stopped backing down. You have the seeds of greatness in you, but you refuse to water them. You could do something worthwhile if only you worked at it. You have so much potential it just kills me to see you waste it. Walter?"

He turned and walked away, out of the courtyard, between the cinderblock buildings and off toward the desert. She followed him, calling his name; he walked faster, ignoring her, and at last she fell behind.

By then he was deep in the haze-trees. When he turned to look back, the motel was lost in heat shimmer, and the entire world was silent.

The risen sun had reclaimed its power; heat beat down from above, bounced off the pale desert floor, and rose again. Cherrell sweated with it, feeling his palms grow slippery as he clutched the notebook and the pen. He sat down in the unhelpful lace of bush shadows and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. For several moments he waited, eyes shut, listening until he heard the tides of his blood ebb and flow in his ears. A breath of breeze shifted grains of sand, flickered a few leaves. He put the pen and the notebook down and clasped his hands on the back of his neck.

I wish I could walk away across the desert and into a dream, and never come back.

Kim's words came back to him. Fran loved him; Fran was probably right about him. Why was it so hard to hear? Why did he never act on what she said? Would that make things all right between them? Would that bring quiet to the house, and peace?

She only wants me to be a better her, and I keep failing.

There was no way he could be another Fran. Was that what she wanted? Why would she want that? Maybe she didn't know what she wanted, except that it was something different.

He sighed and picked up the notebook. Maybe the phantom Kim had found a way to deal with this. He uncapped the pen and poised it on the paper again, away from the part of the page swollen from moist contact with his hand.

"Kim, who are you? What happened next?" he wrote, though he half expected her answer to be meaningless.

This is my suicide note:

You claim my body is your body. All right. I'll take all the me out of it and you can have it back. Play with it all you want. You can dress it and position it, you can have your dream. All you ever wanted was for the me to be gone. Your wish is granted.

the "disgustingly ungracious"  
Kim Annette Tyler

He read it over three times and felt sick to his stomach. Had she walked out into the desert, dropping her pen on the way? Was the body ever recovered? What method of death had she chosen?

Sweat dripped from the end of his nose onto the page, spotting the word "Play." He looked over his shoulder, toward the Nowhere. Heat ripples obscured the distance. When he stood up, brushing sand off his hands and shorts, he walked back to the motel. He thought about Kim and her portable grave, wondering how the mother had fared when she found that note. Had she learned anything at all? Did she read the diary? Had she changed?

He stopped in at the front desk and asked if anybody named Tyler had stayed there. "A mother with a fat daughter," he said, "a college-age daughter. You might not remember. Or was there a big search for the girl? I got the feeling she ran away."

"I think—" The woman looked upward, tapping her lips with her index finger. "I think that was the art-lover mother. She bought some of the best paintings in the Hopi Cooperative. That was last fall. The girl—she bought one of my son's kachinas. I think it was the second one he ever made."

"What happened?"

"What happened? How do you mean? They stayed here a couple nights, looked around, went away. Probably to Albuquerque—I think they were headed east."

"The girl was fine when she left?"

"I don't know about their health. They looked okay when they checked out." She studied him for a moment. "Hey, you with the woman who yells 'Walter?'"

He smiled. "Yes."

"She's in your room now."

"Okay. Thanks." He headed back toward his room, trying to assimilate the fact that Kim had not killed herself. From the outside, this woman had noticed nothing, even though she had a memory that could scan months and call up a picture. He stopped on the concrete walkway, his shoulders slumping. He suddenly recognized that Kim had indeed been a real person, but that she was not dead. Everything he had conjectured about the situation—that he might be making the whole thing up; that he was being haunted; that he had read this story in a book—was wrong. He turned and went back to the front desk.

"Those Tylers—you have any idea where they came from?" he asked the woman.

"Oh, sure. Somewhere around Los Angeles."

So Kim hadn't been one of his students, turning in a theme—an expanded diary—unless she had been in one of his earlier classes, and her family had later moved to Los Angeles. "Thanks again," he said, determined when he got home to go through the school records and see if he could turn up any Tylers over the last twelve years.

He unlocked the door to their room and opened it. Fran huddled on the bed, crying. "Walter, I'm so sorry, so sorry I say those things to you. I just can't seem to stop myself. I see so much good in you, and you keep it locked up. Like this place. Total desolation. It's a walk-

ing skeleton, half a life." She came to him, her hands crossed over her heart, and leaned against him. Almost by reflex his arms went around her in a loose embrace. He felt repelled and attracted at the same time. The apology, the break in her mood, was what he lived for, and yet, it wasn't enough.

He felt sweat sticking his shirt to his back. Fran was a warm, hard-edged presence in his arms, her baby-powder smell mixing with his overheated one. She heaved short sobs and pressed her tears into his shirt.

He thought of Kim, jelly afraid to leave its bones, body and soul held together by fear. Who was she? Where was she?

"Do you forgive me, Walter?" said Fran after her sobs slowed.

"Of course, dear," he answered, distracted. "Let's pick things up. I'm ready to go somewhere you'd like to see." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

As they packed, he wondered at his own sense of completion and calm. Fran hummed as she retrieved scattered papers and tossed lingerie. Everything had gone according to schedule, he thought, and shuddered, because it was true. Each time they had a fight, he felt better, because he knew there would be a cleared interval before they began the next one. He felt his own strength in being asked for forgiveness and never withholding it.

"Let's go to Santa Fe and find a nice bar with air conditioning and umbrellas in the drinks," she said when they had squashed everything into their suitcases and briefcases.

Santa Fe was a lot farther away than she realized, though. After two and a half hours of driving across the flats, where mesas rose in the distance, rare clouds were sculptured snow against the burning blue of the sky, and small haphazard booths where Indians sold shell jewelry seemed to spring up out of the ditches, they stopped in Gallup for lunch. Cherrill took his notebook and pen into the Plastic Southwest place Fran chose. He sat on a turquoise vinyl chair and looked at the restaurant as Fran frowned at the menu.

The restaurant was a boxed cubicle which could have existed anyplace in the United States. Air conditioners going full blast cleaned any taste of the desert out; the walls were hung with scrapes and sombreros, and what plants there were had fake silk leaves. Waitresses wore skirts and peasant blouses; a rack near the cash register displayed "Indian" jewelry from Japan. It reminded Cherrill of Mexican restaurants in Oregon.

He wished he had worn his jacket. Fran told him what to order for her—"Combination six"—and left to go the restroom. After the blonde waitress stopped by to take their order, Cherrill opened his notebook, wondering if the whole morning had been a dream; somehow, he could not summon the memories. He looked at everything he had written in the notebook that morning; that helped. Then he decided to try an experiment.

"Kim?" he wrote. "Where are you now?"

Who are you, stranger in my arm? Why do you

write these despairing things in my diary, in somebody else's handwriting? Oh, God. Mother told me once she wanted to have me committed when I was twelve. She thought I was autistic. What would she do if she saw these notes?

"Kim! You're alive! Where are you? What's your address?"

I live in Pasadena, with my mother. I write these words—these are the words in my head, why don't they reach the paper? My hand is doing something else—black ball-point pen, I never tried one before. Your name is what?

He tried to write "Walter Cherrill" and his post office box and town on the coast, but it was her address that appeared before him. And then . . .

I am making all this up, I'm sure. I never thought I had such an imagination. Maybe I can edit it into some kind of creative writing assignment, but I'm not sure how. I don't think Professor Wolheim is going to believe I know anything about English teachers and marriage, and he always says write what you know.

Fran sat down across the booth from him, darting quick glances at his notebook. She offered him a troubled smile. "Are you doing that again?"

"Yes," he said.

"Do you have to? Does it really mean something to you? Is it part of your project?"

"I don't know yet." He looked at her, saw her and loved her. Something in him lifted loose and looked down on the whole patterned tapestry of their interactions, from the early days when neither knew just what to expect of the other, to the now when they played off set scripts, afraid, afraid to edge out beyond their roles, afraid that whatever else was out there might be worse. He savored his Godlook, knowing he had had it before, and that it shattered the instant he spoke; he could not remain hovering over the situation and operate inside it at the same time.

"Give me a little more time with it," he said.

"Okay."

They smiled at each other, out beyond the edge of what they knew. Cherrill drew in a breath and wrote.

"Kim? I saw your suicide note. What stopped you?"

My mother is very dramatic. Oh, how I hate to think I have inherited anything from her. If I could pull her genes out of each of my cells I would, even if it meant turning into a halfwit. Come, little chromosomes . . . untangle and split . . .

I, too, am addicted to drama. Ouch! That hurts. In the privacy of my diary, I let myself write things for effect. (You're not supposed to be reading my diary!)

In my blackest moments, I think to live on is the worst suicide I can commit. I don't seem to have the courage to slice down to a vein, anyway.

"You need help . . ."

Not my own arm! Not my own arm betraying me! I'll cut you off, hand. No, you know better than that, I just told you, didn't I? Don't preach at me, hand. Don't you go telling me the same things my mother tells me.

"Kim, where are you now? Where, at this exact moment? Can you give me your phone number?"

From obscene notes to obscene phone calls? No way. I wonder if this is demonic possession. Should I abandon myself to it?

I won't. Walter, I won't tell you.

I won't!

Oh, my God, do you know what that means?

"You said no."

That's right! Hot damn! At least, I wrote no. No! No, no, no! And don't you dare write me, either. I don't think I want to believe in you. Ha HAH!

"Except I could send you a photocopy of what you've written in my notebook, and you could send me a copy of what I've written in your diary. I can't imagine what I wrote! I don't usually keep a diary."

No! This is too spooky. Is this a past-life experience? Or maybe it's like Bridey Murphy, I just remember something much better than I think I do. I don't want any evidence. After I finish this sentence, I'm throwing this pen away.

"I have your red fountain pen."

He waited a long minute, his hand in position. Fran sipped coffee. She had tears in her eyes. He smiled at her and wondered if Kim had actually managed to sever their connection. He felt the pricklings of a grief beginning.

My pen? My special diary pen, the one I lost in the desert? How did you find it?

Fran watched his hand glide, its movements a little messy, looser than he normally wrote. She leaned back against the turquoise vinyl padding of her seat and closed her eyes. He could see a vein pulse on her forehead.

"The desert gave it to me," he wrote. "Do you think there's hope for us?"

I wonder what you look like. I never expected to see a man in my mirror—never. Will you send me my pen?

He put the pen down and rubbed his eyes. He felt a strange trembling pass over him.

"Kim, I don't want to lose you."

Oh, please! We can't continue this relationship, it's

too weird. I want to be able to burn these pages and pretend this never happened as soon as it's over.

Fran leaned forward, looking at the page upside down. "Amen," she whispered. "Amen."

Cherrill looked at her and felt a sudden, unfamiliar rage flower in his chest. "I asked you to give me a little more time," he said, and listened to his own voice with surprise. He sounded chill and remote.

Her face looked afraid, her eyes wide, brows pinched, mouth narrow. "More time," she whispered. "More time to lose your mind."

"I don't think that's what's happening." His voice softened. He touched her hand. "I want to find out."

"I hate this," she said.

"Stop looking over my shoulder. What you don't know—"

"That's not true. What I don't know always hurts me more than what I do know. Truth is my only hope."

He sat back and listened to a stillness settle inside him. "The truth is," he said, "I need to do this right now, and I need to do it by myself."

She hugged herself and looked down at the sunburst-patterned linoleum. "All right," she said.

He sighed, lifted the pen again, and wrote, "Kim?"

You're still there? I thought I lost you after that last thing I wrote. Thought maybe I convinced my subconscious it was time to stop playing games. Just in case you are real, what are you doing now?

"We're having lunch."

Lunch? Walter, is Fran with you? Is your hand moving? Are you writing this down like I am?

"Yes, all of the above."

Are you crazy? I'm alone in the bathroom! What does she think is going on?

A waitress arrived, putting their lunches in front of them, pushing the notebook away. "Fran?" Cherrill said. He slid his French dip to one side and pulled his notebook back in range. "What do you think is going on?"

Fran wiped a tear off her cheek. "I think you're losing your mind, and it's my fault," she said.

He wrote down what she had said for Kim.

Well, what an ass you are! Put that pen away right now.

"I don't know about you, but I'm tired of trying to cushion her from everything. I'm not even sure she needs it," he wrote.

This time the silence in his hand stretched across five minutes. He lifted his sandwich with his left hand, taking small bites, but kept his right hand on the page.

I guess that's right. I hadn't looked at it that way. I try to be so careful all the time, hoping I won't set her off, but she gets set off anyway. What if she really gets convinced you're crazy, though? She'll maneuver you right into a mental hospital, won't she?

"I don't think she can, Kim."

The silence this time lasted another three minutes. Cherrill smiled at Fran. He felt an inner calm he had never experienced before. Fran smiled back for an instant, then lost it. She played with the colored-cellophane-tipped toothpicks that had come with her meal, and gazed out the window.

You sound different.

He put down the pen and held his hands in the air a minute. His right hand tingled. He took deep, steady breaths and stared at that single sentence.

"What is it?" Fran said.

"I love you."

She took a sip of water, her face a picture of struggle. "That's the upshot of this exercise?" she said at last.

"I'm not quite done yet." He picked up the pen, looked at it, then wrote.

"Kim. Thanks. I think—do you want the pen back now?"

—not yet. I guess I don't want to lose you either. I can't believe I wrote that! Or did I? It's hard to tell.

Walter. I think I need you.

He touched the words, smearing the still-wet ink a little. "I'll be here," he wrote. He gave his hand two minutes more, but when it stayed still, he capped the pen, closed the notebook, and put them both on the seat beside him. He folded his hands in front of him and looked at Fran.

"Still writing like the same sick little girl?" she asked.

"Fran, I love you."

"I'm frightened of this—this obsession of yours. What is it? What do you think you're doing, splitting off a personality or something?"

"I love you, Fran."

"Are you going to keep writing these two-sided conversations with one hand, Walter? Please don't tell me you love me again. I need some information."

He sighed. "Yes, I intend to keep writing. I won't do it in front of you any more, though."

She opened her mouth, then closed it. She shook her head. A tear ran down her cheek. "All right," she said.

He reached across the table and took her hand. ♦

# Great Lost Inventions



James Killus

Twentieth Century:  
Class One  
Perpetual Motion Machine

Perpetual motion! Harris could barely contain his excitement. He wanted to throw back his head and laugh a mighty laugh, like all the mad scientists in the movies. Nuts? Sure. But then he'd just tossed centuries of physics out the window!

It seemed like too loony a thing to work, yet there it was. He made another adjustment on a field coil and watched his power gauges. The machine responded with a slight metallic shriek and the arc lamp that he was using as the load became nearly blinding. All on a power input of about a tenth of an amp. What kind of gain was that? He checked his figures. Yes, he was now up to six thousand percent. How was it possible? He really had no idea, but who could argue

Illustration by Doug Axmann



with facts? Energy out greatly exceeded energy in. He tried out his mad scientist laugh again. He shouted, "I've invented perpetual motion!"

He went upstairs to get his camera. This moment should be recorded for posterity.

## The Previous Day

Harris looked over his notes in wonderment. It didn't seem possible. When he had first begun to study the fractal topology of magnetic field coils, he had held a vague idea that it might make a more efficient transformer for low-hertz AC. But his results were beginning to look very odd. It seemed that the energy output from one particular configuration went up according to a slightly greater than quadratic functionality. On the other hand, the power input requirements were exactly quadratic. He had at first assumed that it was just a brief glitch in the coil efficiency, that it would smooth out pretty soon and input and output dependencies would begin to match up. Instead, it looked like the divergence was increasing with increasing power to the device. If this kept up, then . . .

There was a sudden shimmering in the air in front of him. He tried blinking his eyes, attributing the sudden effect to eyestrain. But instead of going away, the shimmer coalesced into two men dressed in black. One of them had a friendly look on his face. The other looked like he had just smelled a skunk.

"Gregory Harris?" the mean-looking one said, but Harris could tell that it was a rhetorical question. "We have come for you."

"Excuse me?" was all Harris could think to say. He always had been the sort that would think of the perfect riposte about two weeks late. "Who are you?" he asked.

"We are of the enforcement division of the Council for Spatio-Temporal Security," the man in black replied. "Huh?"

The friendly one shook his head. "Look, Joe. There's no need to scare him into idiocy." He looked at Harris. "We're Time Cops," he said. "We're from the future." It seemed almost an apology.

Harris was beginning to regain the use of his frontal lobes. They were cops all right; no mistaking the old hard/soft whipsaw. Still, no use letting them think they were getting away with the whole con.

"You expect me to believe that?" he demanded, looking straight at the mean-looking one.

The tough Time Cop sneered. "You're just about to invent a perpetual motion machine and you're having credulity problems? Get real, Mac."

"His name is Greg, Joe," said the friendly cop. "Greg Harris, remember?" Then to Harris he said, "Look, Mr. Harris, I know this is a shock and an imposition, but it's also very important. You are about to invent a device that will completely screw up the universe. We're here to stop you from doing it."

"Look," said Harris. "Even if I believed that I was about to invent perpetual motion, which I don't, how can that screw up the entire universe?"

"Simple," said the friendly one. "You're familiar with the inflationary hypothesis?"

"Too much money chasing too few goods?" This earned him a scowl from Joe.

"Nah, this is cosmology. The inflationary hypothesis says that, owing to the nature of the big bang and the topology of the universe, the kinetic energy of the expansion of the universe just equals gravitational attraction. So the universe neither expands without limit nor does it ever fall into itself again. It reaches an asymptote."

"So what does this have to do with me?" said Harris, but he was beginning to have a sinking feeling.

"So your device taps energy from another universe. It's vaguely related to time travel, which we'd also have to quash. This is bad enough without having to deal with people untrained in anachronism theory."

"You're starting to babble, Ed," said the mean-looking cop.

"Oh. Sorry. Must be the oxygen in the air. Anyway. More energy shows up as mass, that upsets the balance, and sometime in the far future the universe implodes. Sorry, but we have to kill you now."

"What!" screamed Harris. "Wait! No, look. I'll destroy my notes. I'll quit my job. I'll leave the country . . ."

Joe consulted his notes. "It says here that if we take your offer, you'll tell one of your grandchildren about your research, and then we have to kill her." He looked at Harris as if he were pond slime. "Really, your own granddaughter."

"How can I be convicted of a crime I haven't committed yet? How can I have a granddaughter if you kill me? I won't say anything to her. Honest."

"How can we trust someone who'd do that to his own flesh and blood? Besides, only one chance and no appeals. Breaking the law of mass/energy conservation is a capital crime." Both men lifted their hands.

Harris never even knew what killed him.

## Twenty-first Century:

### Class Two

### Perpetual Motion Machine

U Chim consulted his notes and wiped his brow. Amazing, simply amazing. The field seemed to be a perfect heat sink. Perfect. What a fortunate accident. How pleased his family would be.

He had started out merely dabbling in some of the principles of magnetic refrigeration. That was natural enough, since his country was so devilishly hot. Sometimes he longed for the cool he had experienced in his school days at Oxford.

He soon replicated most conventional phenomena of material cooling with tuned magnetic coupling. Then he began to experiment with different topological configurations of the magnetic field. That was when he made his breakthrough. One particular field configuration produced amazingly efficient cooling. In fact, it seemed to be more efficient than the second law of thermodynamics would allow; it behaved as if it were at absolute zero. This seemed impossible, but he had to find out.

It had required a fairly simple sterling engine to make use of the heat sink field. From there, well, the efficiency of the engine approached one hundred percent extraction of thermal energy. It was difficult to measure precisely. Since the field did not require much power to maintain, the work extracted from any source of heat greatly exceeded the field requirements. How was this possible? It seemed like perpetual motion. It was perpetual motion. U Chim did a little hop in delight.

He began making plans to celebrate.

### The Previous Day

U Chim was bending over his laboratory bench when the air behind him began glowing. He noticed the change in light and turned to find two men standing where no one had been moments before. Both men were dressed in black.

"U Chim," said one of them. It was not a question. Then they identified themselves as Time Police and accused him of felony conspiracy to break the Second Law of Thermodynamics. U Chim was dumbfounded.

"How can this be illegal?" asked U Chim. "How can it do harm?"

"Time's arrow," said the policeman who did not look as if he were crawling around in a sewer. "Entropy is time's arrow. If it doesn't continue to increase, you can't tell the difference between past and future at the cosmic level. Makes time travel even more dangerous than it is already."

"But if I did not use the device excessively . . ." began U Chim.

"Nope," the policeman replied. "Even if you don't, *someone* will. That's why it's a conspiracy rap."

"And that's not all," said the unpleasant one, the one who was wrinkling his nose as if reacting to a bad smell. "Your device also violates energy conservation. You are using an outcropping in another universe as an anchor to selectively transfer momentum from molecule to molecule. It's very efficient because of the great differences in mass between molecules and your anchor, but it's not one hundred percent. The heat sink field loses one part in ten million of energy throughput. Entropy is reduced, but so is the total energy content of the universe. So you're in for misdemeanor violation of the First Law of Thermodynamics as well."

"I do not understand," said U Chim for the seventeenth time in ten minutes.

"It's the old inflationary hypothesis," said Ed, the one who did not look like he had just murdered his mother. "Expansion and gravitation are in balance. If you lose net mass and energy from the universe, the velocity of the outer edge increases and becomes faster than light. There's a positive feedback effect, even, that gets worse over time. So, use of your gizmo now causes the loss of a lot of valuable real estate in the very far future. This makes our sponsors very upset. So it's a capital offense, just like the Second Law violation." He seemed apologetic.

U Chim opened his mouth to beg for his life. To offer to destroy his research. But the one called Joe held up his hand. "Save it," he said. "We've found that only one in seventy of you guys who make deals can actually keep them, and that's not worth the expense. So now we just do it and it's over."

Already over, that is.

### Thirty-first Century: Legal Perpetual Motion

Ed Mundy, now with the Research Division of the Council for Spacio-Temporal Security (the Time Corps), did not like feeling like a criminal, but he did. He had an idea running around in his head that wouldn't go away. Technically, it was illegal. On the other hand, technically, it wasn't. That's the way the law worked; you never really knew until you were convicted sometime before you broke the law.

Sometimes he wished he were still in enforcement. But not often.

The idea that haunted him was this: the two ways of using interdimensional fractal fields resulted in either a gain in energy or a loss. But suppose you were to combine the two functions? You'd still be able to reduce entropy locally, but you'd balance out the energy flows so that the conservation laws were maintained. So you'd be off the hook.

Maybe.

Only one way to find out, though.

So he tried it, and it worked.

### The Previous Year

Joe and Ed were having a beer, and Ed was griping again about maybe quitting enforcement and getting a cushy lab job. Joe said something encouraging. Then the air beside them started to shimmer in a way that was both familiar and unfamiliar. Suddenly, two strange-looking aliens were standing there. They were dressed in what looked like pressure suits, and condensation mist began to form around them. The room chilled perceptibly. A little box that they had with them began to speak.

"Joe Cannon and Ed Mundy," the box squawked. It was not a question.

Joe opened his mouth to speak, but another shimmering appeared and another set of aliens appeared. Their suits were so hot they nearly glowed.

The new guys also had a box and it started to speak. The jumble of sounds from the two boxes began to overlap. The racket was hard to understand. Something about Interdimensional Security, multiple universes, and the inflationary hypothesis. Something about conspiracy and partners in crime.

Joe looked at Ed. Ed looked back sheepishly. Joe closed his mouth. He knew that nothing he could say would really make any difference. ♦

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# Alien Sonnets



Charles D. Eckert

BEGIN TRANSMISSION —

Tachyon Beam  
Communication:  
#8450-389-273-6209-2762A  
From: Prefecture of Police,  
Arcturus Station.  
To: Ms. Marta Runnedale,  
Selenheim, Boötes Station.  
Priority: ONE.  
SecClass: EYES ONLY.  
Code: *Daimon*.  
Subject: Homicide.

TEXT FOLLOWS:

Unpleasant duty is best done directly.

We regret to inform you that Mr. Barandon Jeoffery has been found dead by officers of our Arcturus Station Constabulary. His corpse was identified by a clerk at Evening Flower Hostel. The bodies of three other men, who are as yet unknown, draped the scene with him. What has occurred is beyond doubt.

*Why* is another matter.  
No concerned local party

Illustration by Michael Weaver

has come forward to claim remains or personal property. *Custom & Obligation* are not so revered among the young these days. Yet the laws must be observed. ASC is taking the liberty of notifying you.

Your name, Honored Lady, was discovered in his effects.

We are uncertain what relationship, if any, this signifies between Mr. Jeoffery and yourself, Ms. Runnedale. The deceased's personal property, therefore, is being retained by this Prefecture and stored as decency dictates. Allow the Department to convey whatever condolences you may deem appropriate.

Sincerely,

Before relating the sad facts as known to us, we have hesitated to enclose a posthumous message from the victim, previously untransmitted, sealed & addressed to you. We regret breaching privacy. It was unavoidable.

We gather from the contents of the comm that you and Jeoffery not only were acquainted with one another, but also with an individual our officers consider prime suspect in the demise of *all four men*.

This seems hardly coincidental.

Still, it is not our habit to speculate idly. The deceased's missive is interesting. Yet it is often confusing and conflicting, for all that.

It is our hope, Honored Lady, that you can be of service to this Prefecture in assessing the relevance of the enclosed compositions. We find them odd, indeed. Yet your knowledge of things ancient-cum-literary is well known even to those of us on the frontier. You are the "expert" and we the "students," at least in this. We would be grateful for what help you are able to provide.

Also, we are sorry for any pain the following may cause you. . . .

TBC: #(Civilian Override).

From: Barandon Jeoffery, Evening Flower Hostel, Arcturus Station.

To: Ms. Marta Runnedale, Selenheim, Bootes Station.

Priority: TWO.

SecClass: CONFIDENTIAL.

Code: *Ferret*.

Subject: Vindication.

Message Follows:

How can a trail so old be so warm?

But it is, Marta. It is!

I remember thinking how insane was your original request: locate a man whose existence you had deduced via *inference* only! Quite literally from a scattered group of anonymous poems. Literary doggerel, in most cases, written decades—often centuries—apart! *Poems?* By the Prophet's Holy Hair!

At first I didn't believe you. There, I admit it. Truth is, I was humoring you for future consideration. Do you blame me? Your father is very powerful. And you? Well, since when does desire not have its pragmatic uses? So, when you presented the strange verses you had collected, I examined your specimens, listened to your theories politely, and did not laugh in front of you. I then cyni-

cally agreed to your terms, even to beginning the search where you had suggested. After all, what did it matter?

I now thank you for this assignment, dear one.

We've had Solzhenitsyn's own time of it tracking down your clues. I am still unsure if we have located the last of them. Probably not, in fact. But that was before—

Never mind.

There is hard evidence, Marta. *He's here*. I know he is! The dust of ages is in the wind, amid the plassteel and software. Corridors stink of recycled atmosphere and crowded, unwashed Outrider population. Yet my *mercenaries* isolated a scent, like wolves after a bitch in heat.

The mercs are a marvel, by the way. One does not expect that along with weapons proficiency & bloodlust these men would display untapped talents and multiple language skills, as well as unusual historical acumen. Reality is more multifaceted than we think. Plus, they came highly recommended. They're definitely earning their commissions and bonus. That is good.

Because the prey has gone to ground *here*.

My fellows mapped spoor to a certain Outrider dealer in antiquities, an elderly gentleheart just shy of an antique himself. That struck me as odd. Everyone needs money from time to time. Yet why one such as our quarry could not amass any size assets he pleased, over time, is anyone's guess. Perhaps he has but for some reason could not lay hands on his funds? Maybe he is *between* fortunes? Who knows? All that matters is to find him.

The bastard must be getting careless. Sold an incomplete series of his work, he did, to this old fossil of a dealer known for high prices, discretion, other typically amoral standards and—thanks to my boys, who keep coming in handy—low pain threshold.

Wait till you see the originals, Marta.

The earliest is composed on a *parchment scroll*, of all things. The form of the poem itself was *unknown* at the time the sheep's skin was prepared. *Someone* had to be first, eh? Its content depicts things which could have been carved on stone or in marble.

Other specimens date from the 17th & 18th centuries—the ink, naturally, and *written with a quill pen!*—through the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. There is a large time gap between those early specimens and ones of comparatively recent origin. It's all curiously spotty. I do not have a ready explanation.

Some were clearly set down *after* the event, some at the time. A few seem written from a third perspective altogether! (Others? Who can say?) But, Marta, you must *feel* the paper and, oh, the smell. It is *him!*

Frightening.

Yet the mercs have a plan. Simple, really. And it makes use of an ingeniously tiny weapon which silently fires an injecting capsule filled with—well, you do not need to know all the details. Suffice it to say: the drug is most effective.

The rest is logistics.

I will contact you when it is done. Meanwhile, the troops have completed most of the translating. Aren't they wonderful little elves?

Thus, here is what we have:

Sonnet XIX *The Ancient*

I was born before the fall of Carthage,  
And stood with Hannibal at Cannae's gate.  
(Who else would use elephants for portage,  
Over ice & snow, through Alps as cold as Fate?)  
I realized that I was strangely different  
When those around me withered, aged, and died  
While I lived on; without a single referent  
As to its cause, for which I've often cried.  
Time unveils to me that it is Empire  
Which cycles down the ages, one by one.  
By chariot, or by old Cathay's fire,  
The ending is the same when day is done.  
Dynasties flank my journey in Time's streams,  
While wives and children fade into my dreams.

Sonnet XL *Hidden*

"To be a step ahead, appear behind,"  
A wise man taught me, centuries ago.  
And so I wrote—pretending to be blind—  
From "Lost" to "Regained," my *Paradiso*.  
How best to hide from Cromwell and his ilk  
I care not for the King & Court, as well.  
For politicians, *force* is "mother's milk."  
And bribing's rarely wise, the truth to tell.  
Therefore, the "godly," living in plain sight,  
May shield their blackened souls beneath a shroud  
Of pious platitudes and hymns so bright.  
Myself and bairns, we do not sing so loud.  
The frauds; the trials for witchcraft; so much pain.  
It may be years before I write again.

Sonnet LII *The Sage*

"Monsieur De Tocqueville," my companion said,  
"What are your impressions of this young land?"  
He seemed so eager, nodding his tall head;  
So clearly unafraid to take a stand.  
"I think we have accomplished quite a lot,"  
This honest man went on. "The soil is rich—"  
"And the people free," I smiled, on the spot.  
"Yet there are flaws that sigh. The least of which  
Is that rights you've fought and won for *all*  
Do not, I think, apply to *all* your groups:  
Your natives, slaves, and women, you'll recall.  
They cannot long remain such passive dupes.  
And yet, *the worst*, for your posterity:  
The Tyranny of the Majority."

Sonnet LXIV *Sobibór*

To live is to resist, and plot revolt;  
To *make* explosives, one ounce at a time;  
To smuggle what was needful, bolt by bolt;  
To steal the rest, and store beneath the lime.  
The months, it seemed, to raise an underground,  
To organize subversion of the crews—  
The Nazis killed each rebel that they found  
(By torture and starvation) of the Jews.  
Despite our complex planning, bribes & all,  
Uncounted dead were rendered into lard.  
When *The Day* came, at last, we found the hall  
Blocked by one particular SS guard.  
I made it my own task to stab that man.  
We cursed the ovens, stormed the fence, and ran!

\* \* \*

I see now as you do, so clearly.  
To think that a living person, one man, possesses such  
longevity. The medicos are able to extend life only so far.  
And no more. I used to believe that was enough. But  
him? How many years—nay, centuries!—has he lived?  
You were right, Marta. A secret such as that is worth any  
effort. It is beyond price.

Yet what *other* knowledge may this great vessel contain?  
We even found notes—intriguing fragments, you  
may be sure—referring to such disparate items as: "I . . .  
designing the latest in defenses . . ." and "I . . . It's dangerous  
to fail a Borgia Pope . . ." Inferences regarding  
*additional notebooks*! What further treasures await? And  
how might he be induced to comply?

I am sure your father will know how to deal with him.  
The experts of all stripes he will be able to hire. Perhaps  
my mercs may have a suggestion or two, as far as persuasion  
is concerned. You could indulge yourself with  
him, as well, my dear. And I know you will.

A woman's touch, eh?  
"There are no Gods," one mercenary said. "So, he  
must be a man."

With that, we all agree.

But there is more—

\* \* \*

Sonnet CIX *Sanctuary*

An orange sky beneath a tandem moon,  
At star-flecked twilight, more than helps me hide.  
The authorities won't find me very soon  
Along the path I travel with my guide.  
This peasant's really good; without a pause,  
He shakes pursuit as if it wasn't there;  
We need a few more like him in *The Cause*.  
I've got to find a safer place, but where?  
Of the lessons that conspiracy conceives,  
Trust's among the first things put to rout.  
By the brotherhood of politics & thieves,  
I turned my head . . . and then he knocked me out.  
By morning, I was missing clothes and boots;  
I hope the first policeman he sees shoots.

Sonnet CXXI *Father's Day*

Hard vacuum closes, cold, beyond the 'lock,  
As telltales glow in reassuring greens.  
Our slowed & pulsing chronographic clock  
Reveals we must have slithered through their screens.<sup>4</sup>  
Hatchlings coyly clamor for attention  
And seek the recognition of adults.  
*Desire* is the source of all invention,  
But guarantees no flattering results.  
Nothing I can do will save their mother.  
I cling to what remains a foolish hope:  
Other males won't think we're worth the bother.  
I'm glad that there is nothing on the scope.  
The tested weapons silently report,  
With *Self-Destruct* retained as last resort.



### Sonnet CXXVIII *Procurer*

Say, spacer-boy! You very far from home?  
I help you out; you come along with me.  
We going to a Xanadu-type *Rome*;  
How much, you ask? Well, nothing I know free.  
But you not worry, boy; we later talk  
About such things as price. Now, what you need?  
We got females, males, neuters; why you balk?  
You like machines? We got the best, indeed!  
Hey, where you go? You don't like having fun?  
You pay for best, you get it, like no other.  
You think there nothing new under *this* sun?  
Guess you *better* go back to your mother!  
What the hell, I got to make a living.  
How about you? You got cash? We giving.

### Sonnet CXXXIX *Marooned*

My carapace is leaching chitin now,  
And pincer tips are crumbling to dust.  
Ancestors come to claim their own, somehow;  
Deteriorating seals do what they must.  
Strong tidal forces tickled us before  
Our vessel was deserted by the crew.  
This neutron star has something else in store;  
But then, perhaps it's best I never knew.  
A dwarf blue-white suspended off to port  
Shines weakly, as it's curiously companioned.  
We're not the only ones to come up short:  
This star system has also been abandoned.  
A thousand years—*ten* thousand—from today,  
Who else will chance find trapped in just this way?

### Sonnet CLVI *Mercenary*

Top-kick says the best blades come from Boötes.  
You need a balanced *pair* that fit your right:  
One folding-clasp, concealable, for "duties;"  
A composite "Ka-Bar," black, and slick as night.  
For small arms, go with Linear Induction;  
You just can't beat a good Arcturan brand.  
The finest are original production;  
They'll help you stay away from hand-to-hand.  
Collect your pelf up-front, plus death insurance;  
Keep weapons (hot), clothes (dry), and insect salve.  
"Checking out" 's an anytime occurrence;  
Today's the *only* one you're sure to have.  
What's waiting high up in those blood-red hills?  
To find out, you must pay the butcher's bill.

### Sonnet CLXXII *Cemetery?*

How long have they stood as lonely sentries?  
Our archaeologists don't seem to know;  
Hypotheses fill speculative entries.  
But stand they do, in methane ice & snow.  
Such a multiplicity of creatures:  
Their origins *can't* be here; that much is plain.  
We scan the vast array of frozen features,  
As though we'd recognize alien pain.  
Are they alive? We can only wonder.  
What brought them here? That's question #2.  
Did each repeat its predecessor's blunder?  
If so, are we to join them when we're through?  
Our sensors collect the data for us  
On beings locked in silent, icy chorus.

### Sonnet CLXXXVIII *Hermit*

"It's getting so there's just no elbow room,"  
She said, and downed an Aldebaran wine.  
We listened to her grouse & snort, then boom:  
"I don't care what they say, this moon is mine!  
My claim was lodged and filed in '47.  
Spent thirty years beneath these two damn suns.  
They have screwed the wrong old bitch, by heaven!  
The 'truth' of their decree is backed by guns."  
Smiles disappeared, as she caressed her 'blaster.'  
"If Joe were still alive . . ." she choked. I nod.  
We sat among old holos, fading faster  
Than the memories through which this woman trod.  
I heard her laugh, and saw my partner squirm.  
". . . Don't make 'em like they used to. I'll stand firm!"

There you have it, Marta.

Do these not intertwine very neatly with those already in your possession? The ones I saw before I left, I mean. There are indeed many gaps remaining. Still, I wonder what else we'll discover when we confront him.

It's strange, but somehow I desire to call him by name. That is natural, I suppose. Yet how many names does one go through when counting centuries?

My mercs have been quiet, of late. They spend this time before the mission quaintly. One keeps honing an ugly-looking knife. Another seems to be praying, or some such thing. I am unsure. The physically biggest member of our group is one somber fellow, now. Although he could even joke during the interrogation of the antiquities dealer. These are not the sort one grows close to, Marta. I do not want to intrude upon them at this time. Something tells me that would not be wise.

I am troubled, as well.

All of us have read the poems, during translation, and later. None of them are deathless efforts, of course. Homer, Virgil, and Milton (or so he claims, this pompous, lying ass) needn't worry about competition. Nor should Thomas, or Elmagh. Yet each sonnet is curiously moving in its own way.

Now, the men are on edge. So am I. You would think that mercenaries should be used to the perils of their Craft. But I am not. God, I feel as though I've been hunting Gilgamesh.

Maybe I have.

(Conclude Message.)

. . . Again, Honored Lady, we extend our regrets.

Unfortunately, we must now work, and in earnest. Your help is needed. Circumstances surrounding Mr. Jeoffery's demise are cloudy at best. The only facts we have been able to ascertain are as follows:

- 1) On or about 29 May, this year [Standard Dating], the deceased was observed by patrons of a pleasure club known locally as *Glass Teat*. Mr. Jeoffery was in animated conversation with his aforementioned three companions, *plus* another as yet unidentified individual, who has been described as "well-built, dark, grey-flecked hair, with an odd lateral scar across his left cheek."
- 2) Attracting more than a little attention by engaging

in heated argument—apparently directed at the individual previously described—all five men left the premises at the request of the club's management, with the assistance of a goodly portion of the security staff. The club's employees report this to have occurred at around 1:00 A.M.

3) One Joyce (The Jiggler) Johnson, who was about to utilize the alley in question to perform a particular "service" for a client—who, for reasons of Departmental Policy, we respectfully decline to name—happened to stumble, as it were, over the bodies of the victims. Ms. Johnson's client, naturally enough, fled. But not before literally running into an officer on patrol, who then contacted Headquarters. The four men were dead when our officers arrived.

4) The Investigators located a patchy trail of blood leading away from the scene. This indicates that the "fifth man" was wounded in the altercation which claimed the lives of the others. There were signs of severe struggle. No other trace has been found. The blood trail stopped at a jitney stand on the corner of Peron & Stroessner streets. The cab company denies all knowledge. A check of the local Infirmarys and physician's offices turned up no further information.

5) The Pathologist's Report determined that death was due to suffocation, via a collapsed larynx, in the case of Mr. Jeoffery. Another of the victims—the largest of the four, by the way—died from crushed testicles and a singularly vicious stab wound to the man's kidneys. The knife appears to have belonged to one of the other victims, presumably the fellow's colleague. No other weapons were found at the scene. Among the remaining victims, one expired from shock & internal bleeding, via an utterly amazing series of shattered ribs. The other man had his neck snapped in an almost ritualistic manner. No method used was in any way pleasant.

6) It is the considered opinion of the officers involved that the suspect we are seeking is "an expert at close-in fighting, a consummate master." In fact, as Detective Sergeant Kristoff said: "Any man who could take on four opponents, sustain at least one wound, yet kill all four adversaries, then leave under his own steam, is 'somebody you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley.' No pun intended."

7) We are pursuing all avenues of investigation still open.

Which brings us again to *you*, Honored Lady.

Let us state this at the outset: we do not have any reason to think that you were directly involved with the deaths of these men. On the other hand, neither do we conclude that our perpetrator is a fellow some *centuries* old! This defies belief. We may be a shade backward here on the frontier, but we do not indulge in superstitious nonsense.

However, we *do* have reason to assert that both you and Jeoffery believe(d) in this so-called Immortal. Therefore, the identity of this man may be within your power

to reveal. If so, Honored Lady, this Prefecture must respectfully request—yea, Officially Demand—your cooperation. Any and all information you possess which may even remotely pertain to this matter *must* be made available to us at the earliest possible moment. Failure to do so would constitute grave error. We are certain your Legal Counsel would agree.

But it need not come to that.

Barandon Jeoffery's personal effects, including what he referred to in his message as "the originals," are safely stored. Due to the manner by which we came into possession of them, of course, we cannot ship them to you as might ordinarily be the case. A face-to-face, value-for-value exchange would seem to be in order. Don't you think?

Speak to your Legal Counsel, by all means.

A final point: pinned to Mr. Jeoffery's tunic at the scene was a slip of paper. Nothing unusual about the scrap itself, typical hard-copy stock. Yet not only was a "poem" composed thereon, but the text seemed (pending further laboratory analysis) to be written—quasi-romantically, by our estimation—in the blood of the suspect, himself. Rather a macabre touch. Still, not without precedence in our experience. It reads as follows:

#### Sonnet CCI *Dějã vu*

The confines of the Magellanic Cloud  
Enclose a place of unrepentant sin.  
A floating bastion of the unclean crowd,  
It takes a special quirk to get you in.  
Behind the plassteel gates, within the City,  
Are pleasures quite beyond the scope of Man.  
Once inside, my friend, don't look for pity.  
The lawless rule; so, understand the plan.  
Besides the thugs, you'll face random destruction.  
And, if you live, you'll think you're on a roll.  
Females there give excellent instruction  
But, if you want to stay, you sell your soul.

It makes you think, if you're as old as me:

Have they transplanted Washington, D.C.?

We have no idea what he meant by that last reference.

In any event, Ms. Runnedale, allow the Department to express its profound condolences, once more. If you need additional information which we may have neglected to provide, please feel free to contact us. We encourage you to do so.

Soon.

In fact, we insist.

TEXT CONCLUDED.

Piet Von Haddendorf, Chief Inspector  
Prefecture of Police, Arcturus Station

— END TRANSMISSION ♦

# Sneak Preview: Star Wars, Episode 9— Revenge of the Empire

Thomas R. McDonough

*The Star Wars saga was planned from the beginning as a series of nine films. But because only three of them have been made so far, and because of the rumor that the fourth will not be released for several years, we believe that it is cruel to inflict upon the world population the intolerable delay that will ensue until the last episode is filmed. In this humanitarian spirit, we are making available this plot outline of the heretofore super-secret ninth episode.*

Long ago, in a galaxy far away, the Emperor was preparing a ship called the Death Galaxy with which to attack the Rebels, decades after the First Rebellion. Large enough to contain a million Death Stars, the Death Galaxy bears a weapon capable of destroying an entire star cluster. The Emperor is planning to use the Death Galaxy to attack star cluster Algemon, which Imperial Intelligence has told him is the new Rebel headquarters.

In the meantime, a spy on board the Death Galaxy has told the Rebels of the Emperor's plans. The Rebels realize their only salvation will be to bring out of retirement the old crew that saved their skins eight times before.

First they contact Han Solo, who is flying the weekly delivery of volvolur milk between

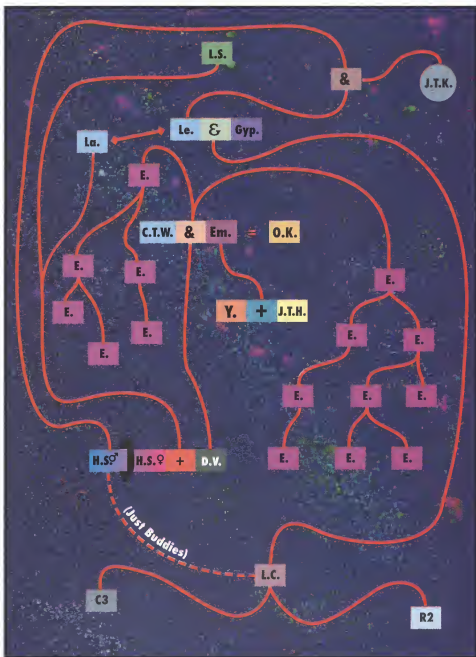


Illustration by John Knecht

Yolar 12 and Yolar 13, with his trusty sidekick Chewbacca the Wookie, whose fur has now turned as white as the milk they schlep through hyperspace.

Han and Chewbacca then track down Luke Skywalker and Lando Calrissian at the Wild Jedi Circus, where Luke uses the Force to juggle fruit in a sideshow while Lando sells tickets. Luke contacts the spirit of Obi-wan Kenobi and learns where Princess Leia is.

Together, the four of them travel to where Princess Leia now lives, the planet Nonox. There, they find her imprisoned within the Old Princesses' Home, where she is still amazingly youthful despite her many years, thanks to the secret medical techniques of a wandering band of space gypsies. Many years ago, they had given her a DNA deceleration treatment that slowed down her aging processes drastically. Unfortunately, what they didn't know at the time, was that she was pregnant. As a result, she's been pregnant for twenty years, and she looks like she could give birth any moment. After a fierce battle, her friends rescue her from the Old Princesses' Home, along with her rusty servants, R2-D2 and C-3PO.

In Han's milk cruiser, they fly to the Death Galaxy. On the way, they disguise it as a delivery vessel for *Galactic Express*. When they arrive at the Death Galaxy, they claim they have a package for the Emperor that *absolutely, positively* has to be delivered.

They are admitted, but on the way to the Emperor, their true identities are uncovered. They battle their way in, and come face to face with the evil Emperor. As he faces their light sabers, the Emperor realizes his only chance for survival is to tell them the whole shocking truth about themselves.

The Emperor reveals that he is wearing a mask, and he rips it off. The stunned crew sees that he is really Obi-wan Kenobi in disguise. He tells them that Luke and Leia's father, Darth Vader, was *his* son, so the Emperor is really their grandfather. Not only that but, thanks to the Emperor's strange tastes and to a little-known aspect of Wookie biology—cyclical hermaphroditism—the hairy Chewbacca is the Emperor's wife. Thus, the Wookie is Darth Vader's mother. Leia and Luke now realize that Chewbacca is also their grandmother.

The Emperor also reveals one other byproduct of his strange tastes—a planet populated with tiny mutant Wookies. Chewbacca is not only the mother of Luke and Leia, he is also the founding mother of the Ewoks.

Then the Emperor turns to Princess Leia and announces that he is going to expose *her* secret. She pleads with him, but he persists. Thus he reveals her story: When Leia was a young woman, she had a fling with a man from a wandering band of space gypsies. As a result, she gave birth to a little boy. The gypsies stole the child from her. And because they practiced DNA acceleration for a living, Leia's son grew up ten times faster than normal. He adopted the gypsy name of Lando Calrissian.

The Princess breaks down in tears. Lando comforts

her. Lando then confesses that he too has a secret. His hobby is robotics, and he now reveals that he once built two special robots from the gypsies' supply of spare parts. And he called them R2-D2 and C-3PO. Thus the two robots are brothers, and Lando is their father, which makes Leia their grandmother. Darth Vader is then their great-grandfather and the Emperor and the Wookie their great-great-grandparents.

Finally, the Emperor starts to reveal Han's deepest and darkest secret. Han threatens to kill him, but the others hold him back, since he's the only one they haven't heard any dirt on. The Emperor explains that when Han was born, he was actually a girl named Hanrietta. When she grew up, she wanted to become a space pilot, but she made a terrible mistake during her flight test. Hanrietta went through hyperspace too close to a black hole—and came out twenty years earlier. She not only failed the test—she was stranded in time before she was born.

Hanrietta met a man, fell in love, and gave birth to two children. The man was Darth Vader. They named their children Luke and Laverne. (Many years later, Laverne changed her name to Leia, because she didn't like the sound of Princess Laverne.) But when Darth began wearing weird helmets and breathing heavily into the videophone all the time, Hanrietta ran off and, in a fit of depression, got a sex-change operation from a wandering band of space gypsies. And that's how Hanrietta became Han Solo, and how he met Lando Calrissian.

Leia is stunned, because in Episode 7 she had had a fling with Han. And worse, in Episode 8 she had become pregnant. So she has been carrying around his son inside her for twenty years. But now she realizes that Han is not only her husband, but also her mother. And on top of that, when the kid is born, he'll have to call Han his grandmother.

Then suddenly Yoda pops in. The Force has told him what has happened. He now reveals that he once had a theory that humans were descended from the interbreeding of two nonhumanoid species triggered by the Force. So, to test this theory, he combined genetic material from himself and a *very* different creature. The product of that experiment was a child who became the Emperor. Thus Yoda is the Emperor's father, and the mother was none other than Jabba the Hut! Thus Yoda and Jabba are the grandparents of Darth Vader. Etc. Etc. Etc.

The Emperor faints.

Finally, when everyone realizes that everyone is related to everyone else, they call off the war and agree to hold a family picnic instead. But just before they leave, Princess Leia gives birth to the little boy that she and Han had conceived twenty years ago.

And as everyone is celebrating, the voice of the Force booms throughout the vessel and says: "This boy is destined to become a starship captain even greater than his father—or grandmother, depending on how you look at it. One day, he will be known by the name of . . . Captain James T. Kirk." ♦

# The Sixties: The Goose-Flesh Factor

Mike Ashley

When Paul Fairman left in 1958, Ziff-Davis could easily have suspended publication of *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic*, or sold the magazines to the highest bidder. Since the departure of publisher Bernard Davis the year before, the company had oriented itself in favor of the slick market with *Popular Photography* and *Car and Driver*, and had little interest in the pulp fiction field. As long as the magazines made a profit they were left alone, but were not considered worthy of further investment.

It was in this backwater scenario that Cele Goldsmith found herself. She had joined Ziff-Davis as secretary and all-around assistant to Howard Browne in 1955, and had continued to assist Fairman during his editorship. Fairman was content for Goldsmith to do most of the first selection of unsolicited manuscripts, while he dealt with the regular contributors. By the time he left, she had gained sufficient editorial experience to take over. Perhaps Ziff-Davis had some concern about her ability to work totally alone, since the company brought in Norman Lobsenz as editorial consultant. "Norm and I had a fabulous working arrangement," Cele told me when we corresponded in 1982. "Without him I would have been in total isolation."

Goldsmith chose all the material, edited everything, selected the title and blurb typefaces and dummed the monthly magazines by herself. Lobsenz, who arrived for an editorial conference usually once a week,

penned the editorials, read her choices, and wrote the blurbs for the stories. They did cover blurbs together, and Goldsmith assigned both interior and cover art.

Goldsmith had no scientific background but had a sound judgment of story content and development, and this was the key to her success. She accepted stories on their value as fiction rather than as *science* fiction. "When I read something I didn't understand, but intuitively *knew* was good," she said, "I'd get 'goose flesh' and never doubt we had a winner." That "goose flesh" was transmitted to the readers. I know when I encountered the Goldsmith *Amazings* and *Fantastics* in the early 1960s, I got goose flesh because of the power and originality of their content. As I look now at the 150 or more total issues of those two magazines that Cele Goldsmith edited, that thrill is still there.

The change was noticeable almost immediately. For a start, all of the old house pseudonyms vanished. The authors behind the names—Silverberg, Slesar, Ellison, and Garrett—continued to appear, but with more original, non-formula stories.

Goldsmith regards the March 1959 issue of *Amazing* as the first to reflect the steps she wished to take.

## The Amazing Story Part 5

That magazine featured a new cover artist, Albert Nuetzell. Cover art was to become a distinct feature of Goldsmith's tenure. Under Fairman and in the later days of Howard Browne's editorship, the covers had been left chiefly to Ed Valigursky, a competent artist but one who let B-movie action and imagery override originality and artistic value. Almost all of the Goldsmith-era covers, on the other hand, are of artistic merit. Her mainstay artists were Alex Schomburg, Ed Emshwiller, George Schelling, and Lloyd Birmingham. There are also some striking covers by Robert Adragna and Gray Morrow, and even one by Virgil Finlay.

The next distinctive feature of that issue was the beginning of a new serial by E. E. (Doc) Smith, "The Galaxy Primes." It was a delight to see Smith back in *Amazing*, the magazine through which he had opened the field to the super-science revolution with "The Skylark of Space" in 1928. His new novel, which received a mixed reaction at the time, is an ebullient blend of higher mathematics, mental powers, and planetary adventure.

The presence of Smith in this issue was symbolic. It was both a link to the groundbreaking origins of *Amazing*, and an announcement

that the next revolution was about to take place. By providing that feeling of continuity, Goldsmith had succeeded in breaking from the old mold into the new without dispossessing readers, which is what had happened when Howard Browne had tried to upgrade *Amazing* from its old pulp image in 1953.

This approach was echoed in the magazine's third feature. Goldsmith had commissioned a new story from Isaac Asimov, "Anniversary," to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Asimov's first appearance in print with "Marooned Off Vesta" in the March 1939 issue of *Amazing*. The two stories were published together in the March 1959 magazine.

Readers were very positive in their reaction to the changes, and Goldsmith pledged more. Her work over the next few years can best be summarized by saying that she encouraged both the old and the new writers to try something different. She was always prompt in her response to a submission, which resulted in Piers Anthony calling her "fast and good" when he wrote about her in his *Bio of an Ogre* (Ace, 1988). The result of her efforts was a magazine that developed some of the newest talent around in the field, and brought an excitement to the genre that had been missing for much of the 1950s.

Cele Goldsmith's first major discovery was Keith Laumer, whose "Greyloyn" was published in April 1959. Laumer was stationed with the U. S. diplomatic corps in India, and his brother had brought the story into the Ziff-Davis offices, requesting to see the editor and interrupting her work. She was annoyed and almost rejected the manuscript there and then, but upon reading it she was captured by Laumer's humor and perception. Soon afterward, she bought the first of Laumer's Retief stories, "Diplomat at Arms," which ran in the January 1960 *Fantastic*.

That April 1959 issue also had a Cordwainer Smith story, "Golden the Ship Was—Oh! Oh! Oh!" Smith's idiosyncratic style made him a unique talent, and his appearance in *Amazing* was further proof of the magazine's break with the past, and of

Goldsmith's determination to be fresh and exciting.

The May 1959 issue included "Initiative" by Boris and Arkady Strugatski, hailed in the blurb as the first Soviet sf story translated for American readers. That wasn't quite true, since Hugo Gernsback had reprinted V. Orlovsky's "Revolt of the Atoms" in *Amazing* thirty years earlier; but nothing of the sort had happened since, so it was appropriate that it was *Amazing* that started the Soviet-U.S. link again. Shortly afterward, interest began to climb in Soviet sf writing, and the Strugatski brothers became the most notable among many talented writers from the Soviet Union.

"The Stars Are Calling, Mr. Keats" (June 1959) was a poignant story of a spaceman's relationship with an extraterrestrial bird, which is all that stands between him and loneliness. The author, Robert F. Young, had appeared in a variety of magazines during the 1950s, but he now became a regular in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* through the first half of the 1960s with a special kind of story that put the human perspective at the forefront. Other nomadic authors who now found a home in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* were Arthur Porges, Daniel F. Galouye, H. Beam Piper, and Ron Goulart.

Perhaps the most enigmatic was David R. Bunch, whose bizarre stories typify the uniqueness of the Goldsmith years. "The Flesh-Man from Far Wide" (November 1959) was the first of Bunch's *Moderan* stories, depicting a world where man was almost machine. Bunch used this concept to contrast the human and technological interrelationship. The Bunch stories, possibly more than anyone else's, presaged the "new wave" that was to hit science fiction in the mid-1960s.

It is difficult during this period to keep *Fantastic* separate from *Amazing*. While *Fantastic* tended to publish the more surreal, off-trail stories, it also published science fiction and sometimes acted as a repository for overflow from *Amazing*, and as a forum to experiment. Frequently Goldsmith's discoveries first appeared in *Fantastic* before graduat-

ing to *Amazing*. One such discovery was Jack Sharkey, who had been a novice writer in New York, struggling to sell his first story, when Goldsmith bought "The Arm of Enmord" just before Christmas 1958. She was impressed with Sharkey's work and ran two stories in the March 1959 *Fantastic*, giving him a double debut. The stories were of contrasting types—one humorous, one dramatic—and Goldsmith asked readers which they preferred. In fact they liked both, though it was humor with which Sharkey became most associated over the next six years.

One of the experiments with *Fantastic* was to devote the November 1959 issue to the work of Fritz Leiber, presenting five new stories. Leiber was making a comeback into the sf field, after a period when his descent into alcoholism had seriously endangered his writing. This special presentation gave him the boost he needed. It also gave a new lease on life to those two other-world rascals, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. Starting with "Lean Times in Lankhmar," the first piece presented in the special Leiber issue, their adventures became a regular feature of *Fantastic* over the next few years.

All of the above developments took place in Cele Goldsmith's first year as editor. Her second year was almost as dramatic.

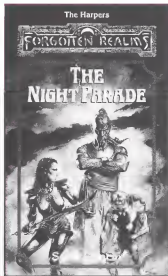
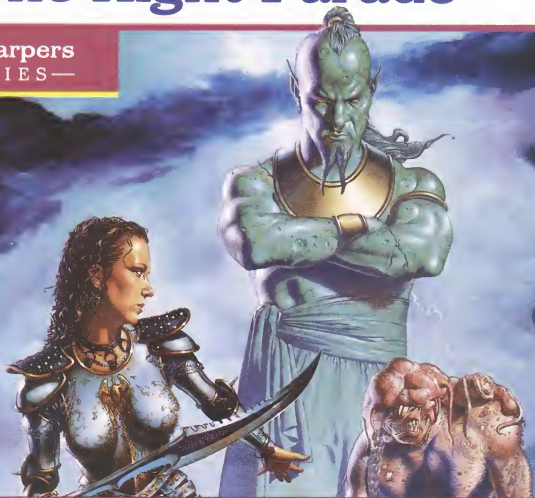
"Transient" by Ward Moore was the lead short novel in the February 1960 *Amazing*. This story brought a large-scale response because of the casual sex in the story (mild by today's standards) and because the story was more fantasy than sf. That didn't matter. What was significant was that the issue *could* provoke such a reaction. This showed that *Amazing* had harnessed a loyal and vociferous readership. One such vocal reader was F. M. Busby, then a leading fan, who subsequently has become an irreverent and irregular author of note. He found Moore's story a "most striking piece of work," adding "I'm not surprised that 'Transient' was a bit too rich for the blood of several readers; it is pretty far out." In his letter published in the August 1960 issue, Busby went on to sum up the recent past history of *Amazing* in





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a few caustic words: "After Palmer's screwballisms, Browne's well-meant ignorance of the field, and Fairman's utter dedication to printing crud (even if he had to write it himself to avoid printing something readable) your regime still seems a bit unbelievable to the long-time reader."

Cele Goldsmith was striking to the core.

More new writers began to appear. That same February 1960 issue offered "A Long Way Back," Ben Bova's first published story. Bova would later become editor of *Analog* and then editor of *Omni*, and for a period became a regular contributor of scientific articles to *Amazing*. The August 1960 issue contained the first appearance of Neal Barrett, Jr., with "Made in Archerius." Curiously, Barrett's stories, of which there were five in *Amazing* and *Fantastic* at this time, made little impact, but today he has started to acquire a cult status for his original and offbeat novels, and those early stories are worthy of reconsideration.

Goldsmith also established a regular nonfiction feature in *Amazing*. One might measure this from "Stargazers," a controversial attack on astronomers by Eric Frank Russell in the January 1959 issue, although this article had been an outgrowth of a series Russell had written for *Fantastic* on strange phenomena. The new series of nonfiction features really started with "The Unused Stars" by Isaac Asimov (July 1959), and thereafter noted sf writers contributed articles about topics in science and science fiction. Meanwhile, in *Fantastic*, Sam Moskowitz began his series of profiles of leading sf and fantasy writers, starting in the May 1960 issue with a study of H. P. Lovecraft. This series later switched to *Amazing* with a profile of Hugo Gernsback in the September 1960 issue. Almost all of the articles that were later collected in Moskowitz's *Seekers of Tomorrow* (World, 1966) first appeared here.

The transition from the old to the new concluded with the October 1960 *Amazing*. This issue featured a new title logo, which was more vibrant than the 1950s bold type, and an enticing cover painting by Alex Schomburg illustrating Clifford Simak's

"The Trouble With Tycho." Schomburg became a regular cover artist for *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, often with bold and original concepts, and in 1962 he was nominated for a Hugo Award as Best Professional Artist. The contents of that October 1960 issue were not significantly different, but the image had changed, and the new-style *Amazing* was now firmly entrenched.

In his editorial in the October 1960 *Amazing*, Lobsenz bemoaned the lack of quality sf. Despite Cele's efforts to find good new stories, they were not always there. Consequently the editors introduced a policy of classic reprints, commissioning Sam Moskowitz to select stories from *Amazing's* archives. These were restricted to one an issue, and Moskowitz's selections were always of high quality. They started with "The Lost Machine" by John Beynon Harris (John Wyndham), one of his best early stories. At a time when pre-Golden Age stories (pre-1938, when John W. Campbell took over at *Asiomatics*) were seldom reprinted, these came as a revelation to many. The April 1961 issue was given over entirely to reprint stories, plus a guest editorial by Hugo Gernsback, to mark the magazine's thirty-fifth birthday. That issue also included Frank R. Paul's last original painting for the magazine.

It is difficult to single out all the stories of lasting merit that appeared in *Amazing* during the golden Goldsmith years. A few by established authors of the day may provide a taste: "Before Eden" by Arthur C. Clarke (June 1961), "Tongues of the Moon" by Philip José Farmer (September 1961), "Third Stage" by Poul Anderson (February 1962), "The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista" by J. G. Ballard (March 1962), "The Stars, My Brothers" by Edmond Hamilton (May 1962), "Chocky" by John Wyndham (March 1963), "Drunkboat" by Cordwainer Smith (October 1963), and "The Days of Perky Pat" by Philip K. Dick (December 1963), which formed the basis of his novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (Doubleday, 1965). *Amazing* also gave first publication to a previously unprinted story by Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Savage Pel-

lucidar" (November 1963), which became a Hugo Award nominee.

But despite the quality of these stories, it was not them that gave the goose flesh to readers. That excitement and anticipation came from the new writers who were emerging, who were bringing bold new ideas to sf and challenging old concepts. It was this aspect of her work that gave Cele the biggest thrill.

Of the authors who debuted in the middle period of Goldsmith's editorship, four stand out: Roger Zelazny, Thomas M. Disch, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Piers Anthony. There is little doubt that science fiction owes a debt to Cele Goldsmith for putting these writers on the road. All of them had already tried to sell professionally—Le Guin had submitted a story to *Amazing* as far back as 1939—but none of them had found an editor appreciative of their talents. Only Goldsmith saw through the fantastic trimmings to the creative core, and her feedback gave the authors a respectability and encouragement. Although Anthony received only \$20 for his first story, "Possible to Rue" (*Fantastic*, April 1963), he summed up the feeling of all authors with their first sale when he wrote in his autobiography that "the significance extended far beyond the money. *I had made it!*"

Zelazny sold twenty-three stories to Cele Goldsmith, of which "He Who Shapes" (January-February 1965) went on to win the first Nebula Award (presented by the newly formed Science Fiction Writers of America) for the year's best novella. All of his stories were refreshingly different, pushing back the boundaries of sf. Among them are "The Graveyard Heart" and "The Furies," now considered among sixties masterpieces of the outré, and his stories about Dilvish the Damned. All of these appeared in that cauldron of the bizarre, *Fantastic*.

Cele Goldsmith's efforts were recognized by the fans voting for the annual Hugo Awards. In 1960 *Amazing* was nominated for the first time in the Best Professional Magazine category (though it lost out to *FE&SF*). It was on the ballot again in 1961, 1962, 1964, and 1965, and *Fantastic*

was nominated in 1963. Unfortunately, neither magazine ever won the award, but in 1962 the committee gave a special award to Cele Goldsmith for "the continued and consistent improvement, both visually and qualitatively, in the magazines which she edits." She was the first sf magazine editor to be specifically recognized.

Alas, all Golden Ages come to an end. Despite a further facelift in January<sup>1</sup> 1964, which gave *Amazing* a more strident logo, the quality of the magazine's content started to decline. In retrospect one might argue that the lead *Amazing* had taken was now being imitated by rival magazines, especially *If* in the United States, under Frederik Pohl, and *New Worlds* in England, under Michael Moorcock, and this was draining the special qualities away from *Amazing*. I'm not convinced that was the case. *Amazing* was still finding fresh talent, including Norman Spinrad, Walter F. Moudy, Robert H. Rohrer, and Leo P. Kelley, and there were still plenty of good stories. The sparkle only vanished in the final few issues when the fate of the magazine was known.

By 1964 Ziff-Davis had completed its plans for expansion into the slick market, and *Amazing* and *Fantastic* did not figure in those plans; Z-D wanted more hi-fi than sci-fi. *Amazing's* circulation had dropped from 52,000 in 1962 to 35,000 in 1964, and the publisher called it a day. Ziff-Davis looked around for a purchaser, and in March 1965 the titles were sold to Sol Cohen, at that time the publisher of *Galaxy* and *If*.

Cele Goldsmith Lalli (she had married in 1964) chose not to go with the magazines, and moved onto the editorial staff of *Modern Bride* (she became its editor in 1982). Her last issue was for June 1965. There were no farewells or goodbyes. After nearly seven years as editor, and the best one *Amazing* had had—indeed, one of the best magazine editors the field has seen—Cele Lalli moved on. And after twenty-seven years as *Amazing's* publisher, Ziff-Davis parted company without a single eulogy.

In buying the magazines, Cohen established a new company called

Ultimate Publishing. His partner was Arthur Bernhard; however, Bernhard had nothing to do with the production side. Cohen kept this as his specialty, though he brought in as editor Joseph Wrzos (who anglicized his name to Ross to avoid any spelling errors). Wrzos was an English teacher who had worked for a short period as an assistant at Gnome Press in the 1950s. He had met Cohen by chance when he called at the *Galaxy* offices in late March 1965 to pick up an advance copy of the June issue. Cohen had been impressed that anyone should come from New Jersey for that reason, and he was further impressed by Wrzos's knowledge of the field. A few weeks later Wrzos received a phone call from Cohen offering him the editorship of Cohen's two new magazines.

It was Cohen's belief that the only way to make the magazines profitable was to instigate a reprint policy. With the sale, Cohen had acquired all the rights to the stories purchased by Ziff-Davis. This included second serial rights, meaning that a story could be reprinted in the magazine without further payment to the author. There was nothing untoward about this procedure in the old pulp days, when authors seldom expected a story to be reprinted and preferred the money up front. Cohen thus sought to convert both *Amazing* and *Fantastic* into all-reprint magazines. Wrzos talked him out of this, arguing that to attract readers the magazines should run at least one new story per issue. This wasn't difficult to do at the start, since Cohen had the remaining stories in the Ziff-Davis inventory. Moreover, with a free range over *Amazing's* forty years' worth of material, Wrzos had a huge selection of good stories to pick from.

The first year of the Ultimate *Amazing* was consequently not at all bad, and circulation did rise to nearly 50,000. New stories included "On the Sand Planet" by Cordwainer Smith, Murray Leinster's novel "Killer Ship," Philip K. Dick's "Your Appointment Will Be Yesterday," and Roger Zelazny's "For a Breath I Tarry" (in *Fantastic*). The reprints were also worthy of resurrection,

though here Cohen entered dangerous territory.

Perhaps it wasn't too bad when the stories reprinted were early tales by writers long dead or forgotten. But when the selections were of more recent vintage, with the writers still active, they began to look askance at Cohen's practices. Whether or not he was legally right, reprinting stories by authors without any payment was not an accepted practice, and certainly one that was frowned upon by the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA), then under the presidency of Damon Knight.

Cohen compounded the problem, however, not only by continuing with the reprints in *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, but by starting a series of new magazines that consisted entirely of reprints and for which not a single payment was made. The first of these was *Great Science Fiction*, which went on sale in October 1965, followed by *The Most Thrilling Science Fiction Ever Told* (in April 1966) and by *Science Fiction Classics* (in April 1967). This last title came under a new imprint that Cohen set up pseudonymously, and he brought in Herb Lehrman to help in the selection of reprints. (None of the editors of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* during this time had anything to do with the production of the all-reprint magazines.) This move only antagonized SFWA all the more, and when Cohen refused to pay even token reprint fees to the authors, SFWA declared a boycott of the magazines and undertook legal proceedings against Cohen.

This battle went on for many months and brought a sour taste to the sf magazine world. After two years, Joseph Wrzos believed he had done all he could for the magazines, and had exhausted what he felt to be the best of the old material without transgressing into the realms of SFWA authors. Wrzos resigned in the summer of 1967 (his last issue being the November *Fantastic*).

Despite his brief tenure, Wrzos had served more than adequately as an editor in difficult circumstances, and the magazines had benefited from his love for the field. He had succeeded in buying some fine serials

and novelettes including, in his second year, "Ensign Flandry" by Poul Anderson, "Born Under Mars" by John Brunner, "The Heaven Makers" by Frank Herbert, and Jack Vance's "The Man From Zodiac." But because most of these stories either came out as novels shortly after their magazine appearances, or were soon included in authors' collections, they are not remembered for their magazine publication, and *Amazing* is only remembered as a reprint magazine—and that almost as a mark of disdain. Yet other reprint magazines, from *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* to *Magazine of Horror* (which didn't pay for reprint rights either) are remembered with fond nostalgia. Such is history.

If we are to put the record straight here, then we may look down upon *Great SF* and *Most Thrilling SF* (and the score of other low-budget titles that Cohen released) because of the non-payment policy, and because of the quality of some of the fiction that was reprinted (most selections coming from the Palmer years). But if we are honest about *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, those issues were of as reasonable quality as possible in the circumstances.

It was sobering that at the time of this unfortunate episode the magazine's founder, Hugo Gernsback, died at the age of 83 on August 19, 1967. He must have looked with sadness upon the fate of his revolutionary brainchild.

The year after Wrzos's departure was one of rapid change. He was succeeded by Harry Harrison. As an author, Harrison has maintained an enviable reputation for his action-packed sf (such as the *Deathworld* series) and for his humorous satires about the Stainless Steel Rat. He had known Cohen since the early 1950s, and more recently had helped work out an interim agreement with SFWA. He had also been reviewing books for *Amazing* for the last few issues. When Cohen asked if he would help edit the magazines, Harrison agreed on the condition that all reprints be phased out within a year.

Harrison's tenure was too brief to

identify a discernible editorial trend. He sought to secure an international flavor for the magazine, printing a new Russian story, "An Unusual Case" by Gennadiy Gor, and introducing a featured "letter" from foreign lands—somehow, Brian Aldiss managed to contribute both a London letter and an Oslo letter. But Harrison left little mark on the fiction. Perhaps his most notable new story was Samuel Delany's "House A-Fire" (an excerpt from his novel *Nova*), but history may consider his most important story as being "A Darkness in My Soul" by Dean R. Koontz in the January 1968 *Fantastic*. In truth, though, this story—one of Koontz's earliest and best—had been purchased by Wrzos. The most popular story Harrison published was almost certainly "Idiot's Mate" by Robert Taylor, which was the only *Amazing* story from the second half of the 1960s to be nominated for a Hugo. It considers man's inhumanity to man in a real-life chess match played to the death on the Moon.

Harrison's editorials suggest that he would have developed a blend between the emerging "new wave" fiction and the best of the pulp tradition, but none of this came about.

Five months after Harrison arrived he left, unable to persuade Cohen to drop the reprints. Harrison recommended Barry Malzberg, whom Cohen knew from his work at a literary agency. Malzberg started work on April 1, 1968, and resigned on October 19. In that period he compiled three issues each of *Amazing* and *Fantastic* using stories purchased, for the most part, by Harrison. The January 1969 *Amazing* is probably the closest to an all-Malzberg issue. It included the start of Richard C. Meredith's powerful novel "We All Died at Breakaway Station" and a Dean Koontz story, "Temple of Sorrow." It is interesting to note in Malzberg's blurb for the story that he speculated on "just how good Mr. Koontz is going to be."

In this issue Malzberg also contributed his only editorial to the magazine. Here, in his characteristically

acerbic style, he claimed that most magazine sf was "ill-written, ill-characterized, ill-conceived and so excruciatingly dull as to make me question the ability of the writers to stay awake during its composition . . ." Malzberg contended that science fiction had to break with its tradition and establish itself as part of the mainstream of literature, albeit an eclectic element. Malzberg's idea of radical writers included R. A. Lafferty, John Sladek, Thomas Disch, and David Bunch, whose stories he purchased. But Malzberg was not able to develop his plans. He fell out with Cohen over a cover that Malzberg had been authorized to commission but which Cohen refused to pay for.

In the background at this time, Robert Silverberg, who had become the new president of SFWA, had been seeking to achieve an amicable agreement between the organization and Cohen. It was not easy because of Cohen's steadfast refusal to pay for reprints, and his insistence upon their use. Eventually, with patient coaxing, Silverberg reached a partly workable agreement. In appreciation, Malzberg credited him as Associate Editor of the magazine, though he had no real involvement with it other than writing a few guest editorials and articles. In the summer of 1968 Cohen told Silverberg that Malzberg was about to resign and asked if Silverberg had any idea for a successor. Silverberg recommended Ted White, who was promptly hired. Silverberg subsequently learned that Malzberg had not at that time intended to resign, and Cohen had used the opportunity of finding a new editor to fire Malzberg.

It was all unsavory and distasteful, and this period of *Amazing* has to be among the lowest in terms of its publishing morals, even though it was not its lowest in story content.

But with the arrival of Ted White on the scene, all of that was about to change. Cohen at last met his match, and White was to usher *Amazing* into a silver, if not a golden, age. We'll look at his impact on the magazine next month. ♦

Looking Forward:

# The Lodge of the Lynx

by Katherine Kurtz

and Deborah Turner Harris

Coming in June 1992 from Ace Books

## Introduction by Bill Fawcett

The main character in the Adept series is Adam Sinclair, who in each of his reincarnations is dedicated to fighting the powers of Darkness. In this second volume, *The Lodge of the Lynx*, the powers are striking back. A group of evil men have gained control of a Druidic artifact of great elemental power, intending to unleash massive destruction first on Scotland and then on the world.

In this excerpt, Adam and his companions have arrived at the police station near the place where a gamekeeper recently witnessed a bloody ceremony used to tap the power of the artifact.

The station door was locked. Stamping his feet to shake loose the snow, McLeod reached over and thumbed the bell.

"These smaller, outlying stations aren't usually manned between pub closing and about six," he explained over his shoulder. "There're patrol cars out on the streets, of course, but—ah!"

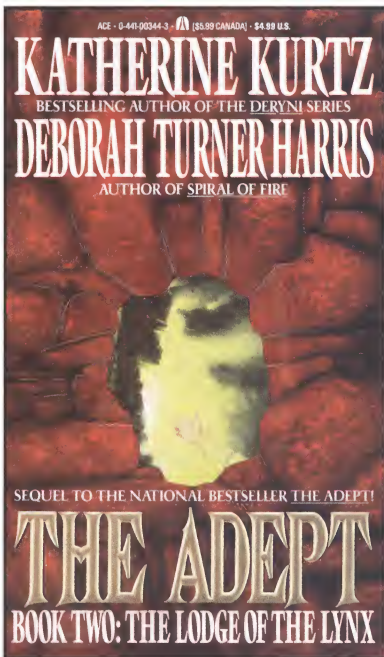
A clank and a thud preceded the heavy door swinging inward. The man on the other side was tall and thin, with a spiky head of reddish hair above a prominent Highland nose. The epaulets on his uniform coat bore the three chevrons of a police sergeant. When he saw McLeod, his big-boned face brightened in obvious relief.

"Inspector McLeod," he said. "Welcome to Blairgowrie. Glad to see you could make it in spite of the weather."

"We've been out in worse," said McLeod as Kirkpatrick stood aside to admit them. "Adam, Peregrine, this is Sergeant Callum Kirkpatrick. Sergeant, this is Dr. Sinclair, the consultant I told you about over the phone, and this is his assistant, Mr. Lovet. He's something of a forensic artist."

Kirkpatrick shook hands all around with the newcomers.

"I have to say, I'm hoping I've called you out



Cover art by Daniel R. Horne



for nothing, gentlemen," he said, with a dubious shake of his head. "If what my man says is true, I dinnae look forward to the next few hours."

"Where is your man?" McLeod asked. "McArdle? Was that his name?"

"Aye, he's down in the lock-up," Kirkpatrick said. "We weren't holding anybody, and he was looking pretty knackered, so I told him he could bed down on a bunk in one of the cells till you got here."

McArdle was sitting on the edge of the bunk in his stocking feet. He was a sturdy, balding man in his early fifties, with a snub nose and fierce brown eyes above a bushy beard. His manner, as Kirkpatrick performed the necessary introductions, was not exactly cordial. Upon learning that Adam was a physician, he said flatly, "I dinnae have any need of a doctor. Nor does that puir man lyin' out there in the snow!—not that anyone believes me."

"No one *wants* to believe you," McLeod said sternly, "because it's horrible, if it's true. But if the sergeant didn't have cause to believe you, he wouldn't have called *me*. And if I didn't believe the both of you—even though I've never seen *you* before!—wild horses could not have dragged me up here on a night like this. Dr. Sinclair even left his dinner guests so he could come along."

Somewhat subdued by McLeod's gruff declaration, McArdle glanced sullenly at his feet. "I suppose he's a psychiatrist or something," he muttered.

Adam chuckled and took the straight-backed chair that Kirkpatrick handed in to him from the corridor outside, setting it deliberately in front of McArdle. Peregrine had stationed himself unobtrusively just outside the door but in full view, and McLeod was glowering near the door, playing the heavy to Adam's more open and friendly manner.

"Why, Mr. McArdle, you've guessed my deep, dark secret," Adam said lightly. "Actually, Inspector McLeod calls me in as a technical consultant in cases involving the occult, and the psychology of people who commit crimes involving the occult. Actually, I deal with suspects and victims far more than witnesses—though I *have* had some success helping witnesses recall more precisely what they've seen. I think that's more along the lines of what he had in mind for you and me."

McArdle unbent slightly. "Then ye dinnae think I'm out o' my heid?"

"Far from it," Adam said. He sat easily in the chair, noting with approval that Kirkpatrick had quietly slipped from the room to leave them alone with the witness. "On the contrary, it sounds like you've had the misfortune to stumble upon something very dangerous—and you can probably remember even more than what you've already told the sergeant. I'd like to help you do that."

As he spoke, he casually slipped a silver pocket watch out of the pocket of his trousers and gave it a cursory glance, releasing it then, so that it swung gently back and forth, seemingly idly, at the length of its chain. As intended, the gamekeeper's gaze was drawn to it. Con-

tinuing to let the watch swing, pendulum-fashion, from his fingertips, Adam carried on in a conversational tone, gradually letting his voice drop as his unwitting subject slipped gradually under his influence.

"Now, your experience earlier this evening must have given you quite a shock, Mr. McArdle. It would have shocked anyone. I know you've been up most of the night. Tired as you must be, though, the important thing right now is for you to try to relax."

McArdle's gaze had been tracking the rhythmical swing of the watch at the end of its chain, but now he blinked and drew breath to speak, probably suspicious that he knew why Adam was doing it. Smiling slightly, Adam merely slipped the watch casually back into his pocket, never breaking the flow of the patter that was really accomplishing what was needed.

"So I want you just to take a few deep breaths and lean back against the wall, if you will," Adam went on. "When you breathe out, try to let the breath all the way out." He drew out the word *all*, so that the very cadence of the word helped to underline the instruction.

"That's right. You'll find that the deep breathing will help you to relax. And God knows, you need that, after what you've been through tonight, don't you?"

"Aye," the man whispered.

"Now," Adam continued after a moment, "I want you to cast your mind back to what you saw in the forest. You'll find you can remember everything clearly—but nothing that you remember will cause you distress. It will be like looking at pictures in a book. Tell me about it whenever you feel ready."

The gamekeeper nodded his head, his gnarled hands resting loosely in his lap, his breathing easy.

"I suppose Callum told ye that I'm head gamekeeper fer Lord Baltierty," he said quietly.

"He did," Adam replied. "And that you're one of the best around."

"Well, I like to think so." McArdle paused to draw another deep breath. "Anyway, tonight I was walking the north woods on the Baltierty estate, just as I've done for nigh on forty years, when I heard some scuffling off in the distance, an' a hoarse sort o' cry—something between a cough and a croak."

"A deer, perhaps?"

McArdle shook his head. "Never heard a deer sound like that," he said flatly. "Poachers, now—that was my first thought. There's a logging road up behind where the sound came from, but no one's meant to be up there without permission, an' certainly not at that hour."

"About what time do you think that was?" Adam asked.

"Long about eleven, I reckon. I had my rifle with me, so I headed up the hill in the direction of the noise, to see what I could see. It was pretty dark up there, with nae moon an' all, but I'm used to workin' by starlight on nights like that. A man as spends as much time in the woods as I do develops pretty good instincts, after so many years—an' I was glad I paid attention tonight."

"Why was that?"

"They would've seen me!" McArdle replied. "Lucky fer me, they had fires goin', so they couldnae see very well



in th' dark. But I'm gettin' ahead o' myself. I hadn't yet gotten to the top o' the hill when the chanting started up."

"Chanting?" Adam's tone was merely conversational.

"I dinnae know what else to call it," said the gamekeeper. "It was eerie—sort o' whispery-like. I couldnae make out what they were saying, but the sound of it made the hair stand up on my heid—"

He broke off abruptly, his respiration quickening, his eyes now focused on something only he could see.

"Don't let the memory disturb you," Adam murmured softly, with a glance across at McLeod, who was leaning against the wall and listening avidly. "I think I know the kind o' thing you're trying to describe. You're not in any danger now. Just take a deep breath and let out the tension along with the breath."

When the gamekeeper had relaxed a little, Adam said, "Let's see if we can go on now. You heard chanting. It was only natural for you to be afraid. Did you run away?"

McArdle's face stiffened in remembered indignation. "That I did not!—not then, at any rate. Whoever they were, carryin' on like that, they were on His Lordship's property without leave. By then, I was pretty sure they weren't poachers—they'd hae scared away all the game for miles!—but it was my duty to see what they were about."

"So you went to take a closer look?"

"Aye. I made my way to the top o' the hill, quiet as I could. There was firelight showin' through the trees, down in a hollow about a hundred yards below me. I didnae want anyone to spot me—that chanting had scared me plenty—so I kept under cover and edged close enough to take a look through the scope on my rifle. I dinnae ken what I expected to see, but it certainly wasnae the likes o' what was going on."

Again he stopped short, and Adam glanced briefly at McLeod and Peregrine. The inspector looked grim, the blue eyes dark behind his aviator lenses, and Peregrine's face, above the bulky knit of his Arran sweater, was several shades paler.

"What did you see?" Adam urged.

McArdle shivered slightly. "There must've been about a dozen of 'em," he muttered, "all muffled up in long white robes with hoods, almost like they was monks or something. One was standin' in the middle with his arms in the air, an' the rest was marchin' round in a circle—widdershins, ye ken?"

"I know the term. Go on."

"Well, then they stopped all of a sudden, an' I noticed there was this other mannie, inside the circle by this big, flat rock. He wasnae standing, though; that's why I didnae see him at first. He was crouched down like he was sick or something—only, then I saw his hands was tied behind him. That's when I *really* knew it was somethin' queer goin' on!"

"What happened then?" Adam said.

"The one standin' in the middle went over to the one with his hands tied, an' he kneeled down too. He had somethin' in his hands—maybe a bowl or somethin', I couldnae see—an' he held it out to t'other man. But then one o' t'other men in the circle gave a sort o' howl and rushed forward. I think he coshed the one mannie

in the heid. An' then metal flashed—a wee knife o' some kind, I think—an' there was blood spurtin' everywhere!"

McArdle paused to swallow. The sound was startling in the taut silence.

"The man wi' the tied hands kicked an' struggled, but they wouldnae even let him fall over," McArdle whispered. "His—blood just kept pourin' all over the thing t'other man had in his hands—frae his neck, I think. When they finally let him fall, I—*know* he was dead."

Adam had not taken his eyes from his subject for some time now.

"What did you do then?" he said in a neutral voice.

The gamekeeper's face worked, and he gave his head a shake. "I was outraged at what they'd done, and I wouldnae shot at 'em, if I could. But my rifle jammed when I tried to chamber a round—made a noise like a bloody cannon going off! I didnae stop to see if those geezers in the hoods heard it. I just took to my heels. I didnae stop till I got back to my jeep!"

He was breathing hard by the time he came to the end of his narrative, and Adam leaned across to lay a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Steady, Jimmy," he murmured soothingly. "You're in no danger now. Just sit back and catch your breath. Close your eyes, if you want. You deserve a rest. You have nothing more to worry about just now."

The gamekeeper subsided, even when Adam took his hand away, but his expression still was troubled.

"They killed that man right before my eyes," he mumbled. "I should hae done something sooner—"

"There was nothing you could have done," Adam said firmly. "I want you to remember that, and believe it. By the time you realized what was happening, the deed was done. You did well to get away and inform the police."

"But they didnae believe me—"

"They believed you enough to send for Inspector McLeod and me," Adam replied firmly. "As I told you before, it was a case of not *wanting* to believe that such a thing could happen. It was nothing to do with you, personally. And no one blames you for what happened."

Seeing that his assertion had had the desired calming effect, Adam shifted back to his earlier line of questioning. "Now. Can you remember where you saw this killing take place?" he asked.

McArdle nodded.

"Do you think you could lead us there?"

"Aye." His voice carried the strong ring of confidence.

"Good," said Adam. "Then that's just what we'll do, as soon as it comes light. Until then, I'd like you to close your eyes and try to get some rest." He reinforced the suggestion with one firm hand on McArdle's shoulder, the other one passing lightly over eyes already closing in relieved response.

"Lie back and go to sleep," he said, easing him back, with McLeod's help, to lie placidly on the bunk. "Relax and sleep deep, with no disturbing dreams, and awake when I call you by name, feeling rested and refreshed."

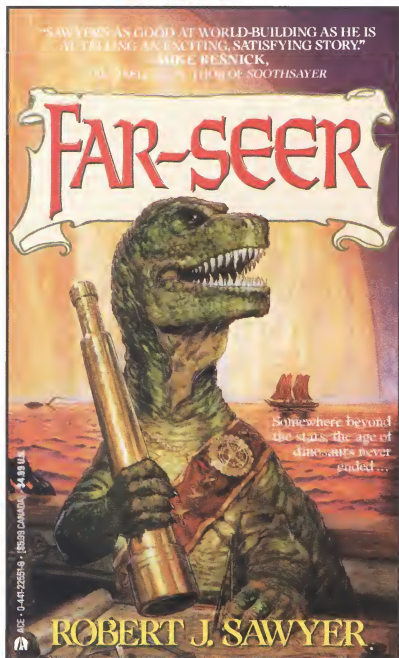
A moment longer his hand remained over the reclining man's eyes, making sure his subject was truly and deeply asleep. ♦

Looking Forward:

# Far-seer

by Robert J. Sawyer

Coming in June 1992 from Ace Books



*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

Some books are just fun; some are interesting because of the characters; others attract you with the unusual or by looking at the world in a new way. In *Far-seer*, Robert Sawyer has written a book that has all of these qualities.

This story is set entirely on a world where saurians (as in dinosaurs) became the dominant race. Afsan, a brilliant young apprentice, is brought to the capital to learn from the master astrologer. When he looks at the "face of the god" (the moon) through a far-seer, the ideas this experience brings him change his way of viewing the universe. As Galileo would attest, this attitude can be hazardous. But this book is definitely not just a retelling of that astronomer's misadventures in a slightly different setting. It's also a rousing adventure set among a new and unique culture, as this excerpt describing a hunt shows.

Up ahead, Jal-Tetex had stopped moving. The grass came to the middle of her chest. Afsan, ten paces behind, immediately stopped as well. Dybo, just behind Afsan, continued ahead for a step or so before he realized what was going on; then he, too, came to a halt.

Tetex held up her right arm, the five fingers splayed, the claws sheathed. A symbol in the hunter's sign language: she had again detected the trail of their quarry.

What, wondered Afsan, had given away the beast they were tracking? A footprint? Trampled vegetation? The animal's pungent wind? Whatever it was, the discovery made his heart pound.

There were six others in the hunting party besides Afsan, Dybo, and Tetex. Three were veterans, each half again as big as Afsan. The other three were also on the hunt for the first time. Afsan had not discussed with Dybo his meeting with Tetex at the Shrine, but his re-

Cover art by Tom Kidd

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spect for the rotund prince had increased, knowing that he had endured the cruel climb and the sight of the bones of dead hunters.

Tetex clenched her middle digits, leaving only her first and fifth fingers exposed, and these she extended as far as she could. The sign meant thunderbeast.

Thunderbeast! There was no tastier prey. Tetex rotated her hand at the wrist, then turned it back. Once. Twice. Three times. Each twist signified a gradation in size: small, medium, large. The animal Tetex had detected would be food enough for the entire palace to have a feast. Afsan could hear Dybo clicking his teeth in delight.

Tetex turned to the right and began moving through the high grass. The three other experienced hunters moved as one to keep pace with her. Afsan, Dybo, and the trio of tyros were momentarily confused; then, one by one, they followed the rest in stalking the great beast.

The terrain here, like most places on Land, was mountainous. Banded patterns of buckled rock were exposed everywhere. The pack was heading uphill, and soon Afsan himself could see some of the signs that Tetex was following. The long grasses were not just compressed; in many places they were pulverized. Smashed ground-furfs could be seen here and there.

Excitement mounted within them. Afsan realized that the same pheromone he had detected yesterday radiating from Tetex was the cause. Those rare females who were in perpetual heat made the ideal hunt leaders, their scent arousing normally dormant instincts within the pack. It affected males and females the same way, sharpening their senses, readying them for battle.

Afsan could feel the sack of his dewlap wagging in the breeze, dissipating heat. He held his tail slightly aloft, exposing its entire surface to the air. Onward, onward, up one side of a hill and down the other, again and again, following the signs of the thunderbeast's passage.

Throughout it all, Tetex kept the lead. At last, she held up her hand again. This time, claws were unsheathed. Afsan searched his memories for the significance of that signal, but, glancing down, he saw that his own claws had slipped out into the light of day, as well. The excitement of the hunt, he thought. Instinct at work.

Tetex waited several heartbeats, perhaps to be sure she had everyone's attention. She then touched her middle finger to her thumb, creating a circle. *I see it.*

Now she held up both arms, showing both hands. Each member of the hunting pack was represented by a finger on those hands: the experienced hunters by those on the left hand, the neophytes by those on the right. By extending the appropriate finger, Tetex was able to indicate a specific hunt. She held up the first finger on her left hand, then pointed to a spot perhaps thirty paces from where she was now standing. The largest of the experienced hunters moved to that position. Using similar signals, she deployed her other two practiced killers.

She then held up the first finger on her right hand, indicating Dybo, and pointed to a position far to the east. Dybo bobbed concession and moved off in that direction. Next, she positioned two more of the first-timers, both females, at points midway along the crest of the

hill. Then came Afsan's turn. He was delighted that Tetex motioned for him to stand near her.

Afsan moved through the tall grass to his assigned position. At last he could see into the valley, see what they had come to kill.

Thunderbeast: a four-footed mountain of flesh; brown, with blue mottling on the massive back; an enormously long neck; ridiculously small head; pillarlike legs; a great whip of a tail.

And this one was a giant! To the thing's shoulder, it was eight times Afsan's height; to the top of its neck, now extended to browse leaves from the trees around it, the beast stood fully twenty times as tall as Afsan. To walk the length of its tail would take forty paces.

The thunderbeast had not yet seen them. The neck was poking into the topmost part of one tree, defoliating it rapidly. These beasts spent most of their waking time eating, moving huge quantities of vegetation past their peglike teeth, through their narrow throats, down those long, long necks, and into their rumbling guts.

The prey was ideally situated for the attack. About fifty paces away, it had walked partway into a loose stand of trees. Hamadaja trees had unbranching trunks that exploded into leaves only at their tops. The trees were evenly spaced, forming a natural pen for the creature. Only the tapering tail stuck out, free of obstructions.

Tetex looked left and right, sizing up her team. At last, she held up her arm and gave the rapid hand chops that signaled the attack.

Stealth was no longer required. The only easy way out of the valley was back up the hillside, and that was the direction from which the nine Quintaglios were coming. Tetex let out a roar, the massive sound erupting from her chest. She charged, back parallel to the ground, tail flying out behind.

Afsan followed. He was surprised to find himself roaring in excitement, too. The ground shook as the seven others charged, as well.

The thunderbeast's head was buried in the leaves. That would muffle its hearing, buying them a little time.

Suddenly the end of the neck swung around, the tiny head and the dull brain within reacting slowly to the nine puny creatures barreling toward it. Afsan could see the black eyes—obsidian black, the most intelligent-looking thing about the animal—go wide in astonishment. The beast began to back away from the trees, each footfall sending a tremor through the ground. Afsan looked over his shoulder. Chubby Dybo, his gut in the running posture barely clearing the soil, was bringing up the rear.

Tetex was first to reach the thunderbeast. She leapt onto the animal's right flank just ahead of the rear leg. Her claws dug like pitons into the mountain of its abdomen. Rivulets of blood ran down the thing's sandy hide. One of the other experienced hunters arrived next, his greater stride letting him outrun Afsan. He too leapt onto the beast, his jaws digging into its flank. Afsan watched in amazement—

—which was a stupid thing to be doing. Suddenly, out of his peripheral vision, he became aware of a beige wall barreling along, slicing the air with a massive *whoosh*.

The tail—no thin line from this close, but rather half the height of Afsan himself—came toward him. He turned and ran, trying to get out of its way, but it struck him from the rear, knocking the wind from his lungs.

His vision exploded into patterns of light. He felt himself being lifted up, knocked flying by the impact, and, heartbeats later, saw the ground far below. Afsan brought his arms up to cover his face. The hard ground rushed toward him—

*God protect me!*

—and all was blackness for an instant.

His whole body ached. He had landed in shrubbery, the thorns scratching his hide. His right leg hurt as he put his weight on it.

He was now thirty paces from the thunderbeast. The monster was slapping its side with its tail, attempting to dislodge the tiny Tetex. Several other members of the pack had secured themselves to the beast's side and were ripping chunks of flesh from it. Even round Dybo was gnawing at the thing's right rear ankle.

By the prophet, this was a monster! Afsan had never heard of a thunderbeast so big. Perhaps they had bitten off more than they could swallow whole.

No, thought Afsan. He would not fail at his first hunt. He would not. He tipped forward into the running posture and rushed toward the beast.

The ground was slick with blood. The creature, still very much alive and fighting, had many small rips in its belly, although, as yet, the internals seemed intact.

The thunderbeast's tail flicked again, and Afsan saw one of the other youngsters—Punood, was it?—go flying the same way he had. But Punood had received a more vicious blow. Even over the pounding of his own foot-falls, Afsan had heard the cracking of Punood's bones as the tail impacted, killing him instantly and, moments later, the splat as his corpse slammed against distant rocks.

*I won't be distracted.* Afsan clenched his teeth, feeling the uneven interlock of their serrated tips. *I won't look back.*

The beast lifted its right forefoot. One of the older hunters had been maneuvering to get at the soft flesh beneath the shoulders, but now the round footpad with its five stubby claws was coming down upon her, the circular form casting a shadow on the hapless Quintaglio. The hunter began to run, but the leg, like a giant hammer, pounded down. It missed her body, but pinned her tail. Even at this distance, Afsan heard the snap of vertebrae. The Quintaglio's legs went out from under her, and she slammed chest first into the ground. The thunderbeast realized it had done only half a job, and lifted its left forefoot as a prelude to bringing it down to stamp the life out of the prone hunter.

Chubby Dybo, tendons from the thunderbeast's rear ankle hanging like reeds from his mouth, rushed into the scene. He spat the tendons aside and with one massive chop sheared through the downed hunter's tail just below where it joined her torso.

The thunderbeast's foot smashed down, kicking up a cloud of dust. When the view cleared, Afsan could see that the formerly pinned hunter had made it to safety

several tens of paces away, the stub of her tail bright red with her own blood. Dybo, too, had managed to avoid the crushing foot.

The thunderbeast was confused about what had happened. Afsan was close now, very close. He folded his legs beneath his torso and pushed up with all his might, divots flying from the ground as he leapt into the air.

Afsan tasted his own blood as he slammed into the beast's right front leg just above the knee. He scrambled, pulling himself higher and higher up the massive thigh. The hide was tough, and he had to kick to get his claws to pierce it, but he was making progress.

The beast apparently sensed something in this new attacker. It bent from the hips, rising up on its hind legs. Afsan had heard that thunderbeasts could do this, especially when the forefeet were balanced against the side of a tree, to reach lofty vegetation. But in a desperate effort to save its own life, the animal had found the strength to surge up without such support. Afsan felt wind flow over his body as the beast's torso rose into the air.

Afsan dug in, desperately holding on. Surely the creature could maintain this semierect posture, with its tail bent at almost a right angle, for only a few moments.

A few terrifying moments . . .

The animal's front crashed down, the forelegs pounding the dirt. Over his shoulder, Afsan saw that Tetex and two others had been knocked off the beast's side, and one of those two didn't look like she was going to get up again. Afsan turned his attention back to the beast. Its flesh spread out in front of him like a wall. He scrambled up onto the shoulders.

The neck curved up in front of him, dizzily, rising into the sky like a giant beige snake. It measured twelve times Afsan's own body length. He looked back. Hunt leader Tetex had leapt onto the creature's side again. She'd ripped a gaping hole through the pebbly skin and was at last getting at the entrails. The beast's tail swung wildly left and right, knocking hunters off as it went. Afsan could feel the mountain of flesh beneath him expanding and contracting with each breath.

Suddenly everything moved again, and Afsan feared he would become nauseous. The shoulders bounced, almost tossing him off. The creature was walking, desperately trying to find some way to escape.

The surrounding trees limited its mobility, but it had apparently spotted a path through the grove. Afsan felt muscles rippling beneath him as it marched forward. Once out of the stand of trees, it would be able to roll on its side, crushing Tetex and the others.

Afsan conjured a vision of his master, Saled. Strength grew within him, power pumping through his blood vessels. He stretched his arms wide, digging claws into the massive base of the thunderbeast's neck. His arms encircled only a tiny portion of it. He pulled himself up, dug his toec claws in, reached his arms farther up the neck, and pulled up again.

Off the shoulders now—

He dug in again; pushed farther up, feet ripping into the flesh for traction.

Again. Again. . . . ♦

# The Status of Planet X

Stephen L. Gillett

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Most SF readers have heard the story of Neptune's discovery: it was predicted mathematically from slight wiggles in Uranus's orbit. An unseen body was tugging Uranus slightly out of position, and the direction of the tugs—"perturbations"—pointed to the undiscovered planet.

But even after Neptune's discovery there still seemed to be discrepancies in Uranus's orbit. Was there yet another planet out there, still tugging away?

Percival Lowell, better known for his colorful ideas on dying Mars civilizations, thought so. He made elaborate calculations to predict its probable position, and endowed a search program at the observatory he had built in Flagstaff, Arizona. After a long hiatus, the resumed search culminated in Clyde W. Tombaugh's discovery of Pluto at Lowell Observatory in 1930—fourteen years after Lowell's death.

Alas, though, Lowell's posthumous triumph has turned out to be flawed. Pluto's position where Lowell predicted was a coincidence, and its discovery probably resulted just from the thoroughness of the sky search. Even after its discovery, Pluto always seemed a bit too small to be causing the perturbations in Uranus's orbit, and with the discovery of Pluto's satellite Charon in 1978, this suspicion was confirmed. With the satellite we could calculate Pluto's mass directly—and it's far too small to have affected Uranus.

So what caused those discrepan-

cies ("residuals," as astronomers call them) in the first place? Does this mean there's still another planet out there that is tugging on Uranus and Neptune?

Well, just maybe. The residuals get much smaller with modern data, but they don't go away, and they seem to be systematic—that is, they're not scattered uniformly as you would expect if they came from the ordinary (and unavoidable) errors of measurement. After all, it doesn't matter how good your calculations are if you're just working with errors in your measurements! (Or, as we say nowadays, "garbage in, garbage out.") It turns out, by the way, that Uranus is the best planet for determining the residuals, simply because we've watched it longer. Neptune still hasn't finished an orbit around the Sun since its discovery!

Unfortunately, no calculation can pinpoint an unseen planet, even if the residuals are real. All you can calculate is a range of possible planet sizes and orbits. After all, the only thing you can tell is that a gravitational tug of a general size is coming from a general direction in a rough interval of time. But you can't tell whether the tugging object's big and far away, or small and nearby. And how far away the unknown planet is also determines how fast it's moving. The farther a planet, of course, the more slowly it orbits—and the more slowly its position in the sky changes.

The best time for both calculation and discovery is when the known

and unknown planets are at opposition; that is, when they're next to each other in their orbits. It's obvious why: they're closest then. So the gravitational force between them is at its strongest.

Anyway, in the last few years, several groups have calculated areas where the real Planet X might lie. If it exists, it's probably in the southern sky, around the constellation Scorpius. This is fortunate because there's another big constraint on Planet X's location. Tombaugh—and Lowell Observatory—didn't rest on their laurels after Pluto's discovery. They continued the search for another thirteen years, which really sets limits on where—and how bright—Planet X could be. As the planetary astronomer Gerard Kuiper told Tombaugh, what you *didn't* find is more important than what you found. A lot of stuff that might be out there . . . isn't. (Kuiper, by the way, almost singlehandedly kept scientific interest in the planets alive during the "long dry spell" between the discovery of Pluto and the onset of the Space Age.)

Because of Tombaugh's extended search, then, if there is another planet beyond Pluto, it's either extremely dim, or it's in an area Tombaugh couldn't search very well. (Or it's not near the ecliptic, the path along which all the other planets travel. Since the orbits of all the known planets, including the Earth, are in nearly the same plane, they follow pretty much the same path in the sky. For various

reasons, though, most astronomers don't take the possibility of an "out-of-ecliptic" major planet very seriously.)

The southern sky was searched less thoroughly because you can't see it as well from Flagstaff. And Scorpius is a southern constellation. Since it's been only sixty years since Tombaugh's discovery, and since the orbital period of Planet X is predicted to be 1,000 years or so, it won't have moved a whole lot. So it should *still* be in the southern sky.

It's an astounding coincidence that if these calculations are correct, Lowell may have been on the right track after all. Calculations of planetary positions often have a 180° symmetry; that is, completely opposite positions often fit the calculations almost as well. (This is because if the planets are far from opposition, you can't really tell which side the tug's coming from.) It turns out that in 1930 Pluto was just about opposite the predicted southern position of Planet X. That's why it looked like Lowell's object. (This also may mean Lowell was right after all!)

What about other Planet X predictors? Most of them are pretty flaky. For example, there's the notion kicking around that the aphelia of periodic comets' orbits (the "aphelion" is the farthest position from the Sun on an orbit) cluster near the orbits of the big planets. Presumably, a close pass by the planet is what trapped the comet into its short-period orbit. Quite a number of planets have been predicted on this basis, both in the scientific literature and in popular articles. People have found various clusterings of far-out comet aphelia and suggested unknown planets caused them.

It turns out, though, this just isn't true. The usual comet-monster is actually Jupiter, for two simple reasons. First, Jupiter's big, so it influences a large area. Second, it's close to the Sun, so any comet that approaches the Sun closely (which is the only kind we can notice) has a good chance of coming near it. It's hard to avoid, in fact!

Other cometary phenomena are even less distinctive. For periodic comets the time of perihelion passage—when the comet rounds the

Sun—is commonly off by a few days from what's predicted. Although some astronomers have tried to explain these discrepancies as resulting from perturbations by unseen planets, there's a simpler explanation: Comets are subject to other forces besides gravity. They're largely balls of ice, remember, so when they warm up, vapor boils away. During the Halley fly-by in 1986, for example, the space probes saw a number of "geysers" and "fountains" of vapor shooting off the comet nucleus. These will act just like haphazard rocket thrusters.

A more spectacular—and trendy—prediction is from the alleged swarms of objects that may impact the Earth every 30 million years or so. Astronomers John Matese and Daniel Whitmire have suggested that Planet X, orbiting at about 80 AU or so, triggers comet showers that make these impacts. (An "AU" is an astronomical unit—the distance from the Earth to the Sun. Pluto averages about 39 AU from the Sun.) As its orbit slowly changes its orientation in space, through perturbations from the other planets, Planet X occasionally sweeps through a disk of comets that's still outside Neptune's orbit. Then its gravity kicks some of these comets into the inner System.

Other astronomers have severely criticized this idea, though, because they think an object big enough to sweep out lots of comets should also have other gravitational effects—and we don't see them. Many scientists also don't think there's a disk of comets still left so close to the main System. The bulk of comets got swept out eons ago into the Oort cloud—the very distant, diffuse halo, named after the Dutch astronomer who proposed it, that contains the "comet reservoir" of the Solar System. The comets here have huge orbits, hundreds or thousands of AU from the Sun, and only occasionally does one get perturbed into the inner Solar System so we can see it. And last, quite a few scientists think the evidence for periodic impact swarms on the Earth is pretty shaky anyway.

On a completely different basis, however, planetary scientist Alan

Stern has suggested that many more Pluto-sized objects exist in the outer—in many cases the *far* outer—Solar System. Pluto (or rather the Pluto-Charon pair) may just be the nearest and brightest. Triton—the large nearby satellite of Neptune, which has a retrograde or "backwards" orbit—may be another one.

In fact, Stern proposed that the large tilts of both Uranus's and Neptune's axes, the "double planet" Pluto-Charon, and Triton's retrograde orbit all suggest that a lot of Pluto-sized objects were careening around in the outer System right after the planets were formed.

The reason is that all these phenomena suggest impacts with big objects. Depending on what and how it hits, the impactor might tilt a large planet's axis, or two impactors might make a planet-satellite pair if they collided glancingly (this is how Pluto-Charon may have formed), or an impactor might even completely rearrange a satellite system. Triton, for example, may have been a passerby that had a head-on with a previous Neptune satellite. That collision was what captured it into its present weird orbit.

None of these seem to be especially likely things to have happened. That they did happen suggests there once was a *lot*—hundreds to thousands—of Triton- and Pluto-sized objects roaming around. If enough objects are careening around, a few will manage to hit in some very bizarre ways. In addition, both Pluto and Triton seem to be different from your usual run-of-the-mill outer planet satellite. They're denser, and so must contain bigger rock cores.

What were these thousands of swarming objects? They probably were mega-planetesimals; a population of "embryos" that never grew into bigger planets. Pluto-Charon and Triton may just be survivors that lucked into stable orbits.

What happened to all the others? They eventually were scattered like spray from a fire hose by gravitational encounters with the large planets. Some, such as the planetesimals that tilted Uranus and Neptune, collided with the other planets. Others were slung clear out of the System.



And yet others were slung outward but not so far, so that they still orbit the Sun. Stern estimates that maybe a dozen or so lie in orbits beyond about 45 AU. A few *thousand*, however, may be out in the edges of the Oort cloud!

And, if these objects really were slung out into the Oort cloud, they have a grand SF implication: they could be important way stations to the stars! Futurists such as Freeman Dyson (and science-fiction writers such as Charles Sheffield) have long proposed that the comets in the Oort cloud will be valuable resources for the star-bound. If planets are out there, too, they'll be even better. Even a Pluto is a lot bigger than a comet.

Of course, if these other "Plutos" exist, they'd also have no detectable gravitational influence on Uranus or Neptune, even from as close as 45 AU. So they couldn't account for the perturbations. If they exist, they're in addition to whatever's causing the perturbations (assuming, of course, the perturbations are real).

They'll also be even harder to see than a big planet. The far ones may be well out of the ecliptic, too. In fact, you might wonder whether we really can call these things "planets" at all. Stern's definition is perfectly logical: he suggests a "planet" is anything big enough that its gravity pulls it into a ball. On this basis the largest asteroids, such as Ceres, are also planets.

So maybe not only is there another big planet out there, but also lots of Plutos, stepping-stones strewn haphazardly out to the Oort cloud. The System may be a *lot* bigger than people have thought!

#### Reference:

Hoyt, William Graves, *Planets X and Pluto*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1980.

Hoyt was a science writer living in Flagstaff who for some reason never got the audience he deserved. He wrote several excellent histories on astronomical topics, including the definitive story of Percival Lowell and his colorful notions about Mars. ♦

# About the Authors

"In 1977, **Barry B. Longyear** decided that he wanted to write science fiction. He determined this by collecting all of the books in his house that he had ever read for fun, stacking them up according to type, and picking the biggest pile. Science fiction won."

So begins Barry Longyear's own summary of his career. The latest chapter in his saga, "Blades of the Diram Ring," is this issue's lead fiction piece—and the first story of less than novel length that has been published under his name in more than ten years. Most fans of the genre recognize Barry as the author of "Enemy Mine," a novella that won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards in 1980.

**Joe Clifford Faust** says that a few years ago, when he was working as a law enforcement dispatcher, "one of the things that stuck in my mind was a pair of teenagers who tried to run away to Texas to get married." That event was the seed that eventually sprouted into "Going to Texas (Extradition Version)," which marks Joe's second sale to this magazine. (The first was "Pins," May 1990.) He's also the author of five SF novels, including *The Company Man*—which, if you look closely, you can see making a guest appearance on the cover of our September 1991 issue.

**Phil Jennings** says that he leads a very unexciting life. "This just won't do," he goes on. "I've got to become more interesting; a handsome, self-destructive world traveler. I'll have to start by working on 'handsome.' 'Self-destructive' ought to come easily. I've got plenty of role models."

"Deep Gladiators" is Phil's fourteenth story for this magazine. If you have every issue going back to March 1987 ("The Castaway"), you now have enough material to make your very own Jennings anthology.

**Nina Kiriki Hoffman** has been getting more and more attention in the last couple of years as a creator of stirring short fiction. "Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror" is her seventh

story in these pages, and she has a basketful of other credits . . . but apparently she still hasn't lost her humility. When we called her to say we wanted to buy "Messages," her first response was, "Just the way it is!"

Well, yes, Nina. If it isn't broke, why fix it?

**James Killus** has been selling short stories for nearly ten years, but hasn't been in this magazine before. We like to think of "Great Lost Inventions" as a way of demonstrating that his career is still in motion . . . at least for the time being, if not perpetually.

**Charles D. Eckert** is another one of those *Writers of the Future* who has become a Writer of the Present. His first published story, "Dancing With Dinosaurs," was a *WOTF* winner in 1989. He has since appeared in *Analog* and *Weird Tales*, and now—with "Alien Sonnets"—makes his debut in *AMAZING*® Stories.

**Thomas R. McDonough** is an astrophysicist with, as far as we know, absolutely no training in genealogy; who, then, would be better qualified to write a story like "Sneak Preview"? His latest book, *The Missing Matter*, is out recently, and his earlier appearance in this magazine was "Gunfight at Bertha's Saloon" (December 1991).

The best kind of alternate-history story is one in which it's almost impossible to tell where the real history leaves off and the fictional history begins. "Against the Night" by **V. E. Mitchell** is that sort of story. For instance: if building an aircraft carrier out of an iceberg seems ridiculous, be advised that such a project actually was undertaken, and progressed to the stage where a 1,000-ton model of the vessel was constructed.

"Against the Night" was so long we couldn't use it all at once—so the story becomes our first serialization in the new-format version of the magazine. Look for the conclusion next month, along with a little bit about the person who wrote it. ♦

# Book Reviews



## RAFT

by Stephen Baxter  
Roc Books, January 1992  
303 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

There are two things I'm always looking for: a good new writer, and a good new hard SF book. When I can succeed in both searches at once, I'm happy. Stephen Baxter tries his hand at hard SF with *Raft*, his first novel, and while it isn't perfect, it has enough going for it to more than repay the time you spend with it.

Baxter sets up the book with this idea: an exploratory spaceship accidentally goes through some kind of space warp into another universe. In this universe, the gravitational constant is different—mass attracts other mass much more strongly here than in our universe. As a result, a spaceship has enough gravity to support an atmosphere, and standing on a small asteroid can subject you to five or six G's.

This change in gravitational constant has implications throughout the universe—stars burn and collapse much faster, and galaxies go through their life cycle in thousands, instead of millions of years. It's a very hostile and alien environment.

Yet humanity survives, partly by harnessing the technology it brought with it, partly by adapting the environment it finds itself in. The book opens on the Ring with Rees about to go to work in the smelters. The Ring people travel down to the asteroid to mine iron, which is smelted

and then sent up to the Ship in exchange for food and supplies. Complete separate societies, the Ring and the Ship are dependent on each other, but don't mingle, or particularly like each other.

Rees, seemingly the only person born on the Ring with a brain or the willingness to think beyond today, stows away on one of the Trees, which are a native lifeform that can fly through the intergalactic atmosphere. Once he is on the Ship, although the Ship people threaten to send him back, Rees's unquenchable thirst for knowledge saves him and they decide to keep him and train him for a scientific position.

The Ship is obviously the remnant of the original ship. A semblance of shipboard life remains in a highly regimented, stratified society. The people at the bottom—Maintenance, Security, and the like—have gotten tired of being ruled by the officers and the scientists. They revolt and take over the ship, even while it's under threat of destruction by a star that is falling past it toward the galactic core—and ultimately by the end of the universe in a few dozen more years.

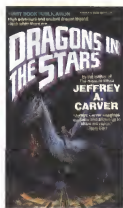
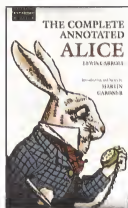
Rees, kicked off the Ship and later exiled from the Raft, begins a journey of exploration and discovery that takes him to the Boneys (a third society of humans in the universe) and beyond, looking for the answer that will save the Ship from the death of the galaxy.

The book suffers somewhat from

some typical beginner errors—occasional problems with the pacing and some questionable word choices. The book's biggest flaw, but a flaw that is a part of much hard SF, is that the characters are simplistic and not well defined—not quite cardboard or one-dimensional, but much more strongly driven by the needs of the plot than by internal needs or desire. They're here to showcase the technology and environment rather than to be the focus of the story.

On the story's plus side, though, a lot of very inventive and sometimes weird things are thrown out by the author. He creates a very unusual environment, and then isn't afraid to populate it with weird, distinctive things. If technology and alien environments are your interest, this book will really suit your fancy.

I found the book interesting on another level, also. Baxter is very consciously building an homage to much of the history of the SF field. He's dipped into the idea bags of many of our best authors and used them to help bring *Raft* to life. He's not derivative of them as much as he is recognizing the masters of the field: Niven's *Ringworld* and *Integral Trees*; Clarke's *Medusa*; Clement's *Mission of Gravity*—these and many other aspects of the hard SF tradition have been brought back to life here in a wonderful story built on a futuristic *Gulliver's Travels* framework. He's not ripping off any of the authors. Instead, he's allowing you another chance to enjoy them, while



you enjoy Baxter's book as well. The flaws are minor, and *Raft* is a book that hard SF aficionados should thoroughly enjoy. — *C. Von Rospach*

#### THE COMPLETE

#### ANNOTATED ALICE

by Lewis Carroll, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner  
Voyager Company, December 1991  
\$19.95

A couple of years ago, Ben Bova wrote *Cyberbooks*, a somewhat satirical look at the publishing industry as it tries to transition from the paper-based book to computer-based books. Technology, sooner or later, is going to replace paper pulp and ink with ROMs and video displays.

The cyberbook is now a lot closer to reality. Voyager, a company that has put out CD-ROMs, has introduced a new line of electronic books designed to be read on the Macintosh Powerbook computer.

The first three titles have been published: Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and Gardner's *The Complete Annotated Alice*, which includes the content of both the 1960 publication *Annotated Alice* and 1990's *More Annotated Alice*, combined into a single edition.

The Voyager people are to be commended for the packaging. They have created a display system that not only allows for easy reading of the material, but has a number of features specifically aimed at people

doing research. You can search for words or phrases, and there is a notebook attached that you can use to make your own notations. Gardner's annotations are set up as hyper-text (click on a phrase, and the annotation is brought up in a separate window). The research and reference material can be turned off, if all you want to do is read.

Their system is written in Hypercard, which is generally available for Macintosh computers. The Alice book requires Hypercard version 2.1 and about 2 megabytes of space on your hard disk, but that includes all of the support programs, the text (with digitized versions of the original woodcuts) of the Carroll books (both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*) and the Gardner annotations. It's designed for the Powerbook, but will run on any Mac that runs Hypercard. It's a pretty, readable, cost-effective package for both readers and researchers.

The book/software should be available through most computer stores that carry Macintosh products, or can be ordered directly through The Voyager Company, 1351 Pacific Coast Highway, Santa Monica CA 90401; phone (213)451-1383.

If this is how cyberbooks are going to look, I think there's a lot of promise once the price of the hardware comes down to consumer levels. Voyager is one of the companies to keep an eye on as they make the promises of cyberbooks come true. — *C. Von Rospach*

#### ALTERNATE PRESIDENTS

edited by Mike Resnick  
Tor Books, February 1992  
466 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Alternate-history fiction is the art of taking what we know about the past, changing one aspect of it, and then seeing how that change causes ripples down through time. In *Alternate Presidents*, Mike Resnick has gathered twenty-seven of SF's best authors and let them choose a favorite presidency and ask themselves, "What if?"

What if Dukakis had won the election—how would he have handled the alien invasion differently? What if McGovern had won and pulled the troops out of Vietnam? What if Goldwater had won, and Nixon had left politics to host a talk show on television?

From a United States in which Franklin becomes president instead of Washington, to a 1968 in which Robert Kennedy didn't die and the Chicago riots take on a much different reality, this anthology takes us through alternate realities better, worse and just plain different from what we currently have. Jayge Carr's look at 1800, "The War of '07," in which Aaron Burr wins over Jefferson, is a scary look at just how fragile our democracy was. Pat Cadigan's emotionally draining "Dispatches from the Revolution" (the best story in the anthology) gives us an alternate view of the 1960s—and shows us just how fragile our democracy

still is. Many of the stories, from Susan Swartz's "Suppose They Gave A Peace . . ." and Barb Delaplace's "No Other Choice" to Ralph Roberts's "How the South Preserved the Union" take a look at the "easy answers" given by the losing candidates—and make you realize that maybe the answers weren't so easy after all.

It's a strong anthology with good writing and some fascinating historical mind games that will teach you a lot of things your history classes didn't get to. — C. Von Rospach

## DRAGONS IN THE STARS

by Jeffrey A. Carver  
Tor Books, April 1992  
320 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Jeffrey Carver's newest novel covers a lot of territory. There's lively space adventure, a problem in artificial-intelligence ethics, and a multifaceted examination of the borders between friendship and unhealthy dependency. The book's breadth, though, is its greatest weakness, because Carver ends up not having enough space to fully explore the aspects of his story.

The story centers on Jael LeBrace, a fledgling star-rigger whose career seems blocked by her father's unsavory reputation. Desperate for a piloting job, she signs on with a captain who proves dangerously unscrupulous. Her only haven from the domineering Mogurn is the Flux, or hyperspace, which only riggers can sense, and only when she discovers a race of dragons native to the Flux can she deal with Mogurn once and for all—at the cost of dealing herself into a mysterious conflict between the dragons themselves.

Carver weaves a solid coming-of-age yarn around Jael, making her an appealing protagonist despite her self-doubts. That's the chief story running through *Dragons in the Stars*, and it's a compelling one. But there are several others that wander in and out of the pattern with varying degrees of completeness. One involves Ed, an artificial intelligence that manifests itself as a synthesized parrot. Is Ed "real," in the same way that Jael is? And if so, why must she and her newfound rigging partner,

Ar, launch a clandestine operation to copy him out of the recreational system where he "lives" before he's erased and replaced with a newer model? The question is raised but never completely addressed. There's also the intriguing alien device to which Mogurn addicts Jael, whose power over her diminishes a touch too easily once Jael encounters dragons in the Flux.

Then there's the dragons' war. Carver's prose effectively lends a spare yet evocative resonance to the draconian realm, but Jael's adventure is at best a skirmish in what's clearly a struggle of longer standing. The origins of Tar-skel, enigmatic master of the forces of darkness, remain a mystery, and though Jael and Ar deal him a major setback, their dragon allies make it clear that Tar-skel is by no means permanently defeated. The frustration comes not because Carver's plotting is sloppy or his worldbuilding inadequate—on the contrary, both are done with considerable skill. It's just that there's far more story material in the affairs of these dragons than Carver has space for in the novel.

Ultimately, *Dragons in the Stars* is both an appealing book and a flawed one, but its flaw is mostly that Carver has tried to stuff three or four novels' worth of ideas into a single volume. Like a good stage performer, this story should leave its audience wanting more. — J. Bunnell

## WHEN DREAMS COLLIDE

by Wm. Mark Simmons  
Warner Books, February 1992  
342 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

Be warned: *When Dreams Collide* doesn't stand entirely on its own. It's a sequel to Simmons's earlier *In the Net of Dreams*, and its ending foreshadows at least one more book to come. (Boy, does it ever!) But despite being a middle book, and despite some problems of focus, Simmons's second novel is a tempting combination of deliberately clichéd fantasy and sophisticated high-tech intrigue.

The setting is the Dreamworld, a virtual-reality descendant of today's

fantasy role-playing games. But the Dreamworld's most important component, the artificial intelligence that serves as referee, has fled the system in favor of the body of a U. S. Senator. Now the senator's consciousness is trapped somewhere in the software while the AI is busy reviving the Cold War. And only game designer Robert Ripley has any chance of putting all the right minds back in the right bodies—from inside the game world, of course.

Simmons has set himself a difficult challenge in this series. His fantasy realm is logically built for what it is, drawing on mythology, traditional fairy tales and popular commercial fiction in a brisk blend of swashbuckling and slapstick. At the same time, though, he openly raises challenging questions about the ethics of managing electronic sentience, and that theme is what really lies at the story's core. As a result, Simmons has to balance the humor-intensive game adventures against the more thoughtful psychological conflicts. Add to this a complex narrative structure in which as many as three Ripleys may be loose at once, and you have a novel a practiced veteran might hesitate to tackle.

Simmons comes close at times, but he doesn't quite pull it off. The problem is that the fantasy plotlines aren't designed to support and mesh with the larger underlying story, and too many of the scenes and subplots go off in directions of their own.

That's not entirely illogical in the milieu Simmons postulates, but it gives the book a rather scattered quality that undercuts its effectiveness.

That's a pity, because the story Simmons is trying to write is a mature, distinctive one several cuts<sup>4</sup> above the average game-world-comes-to-life plot. When he's on track, he can be electrifying, as in a climax that leaps from revelation to revelation with breathless ingenuity. But the confident control that marks the ending is too often missing from the rest of the book, lost in the tangle of surplus plot threads.

But even if it's at best a mixed success, *When Dreams Collide* is a novel worth checking out, and Sim-

mons a writer worth watching. When his craft catches up with his imagination, look for his name near the top of the charts. — *J. Bunnell*

### PHULE'S PARADISE

by Robert Asprin  
Ace Books, February 1992  
252 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

I've been gradually losing enthusiasm for the pun-heavy "Myth" fantasy novels that form Robert Asprin's best-known series. But I'm impressed with Asprin's new series about a company of misfit Space Legionnaires, of which *Phule's Paradise* is the second. The premise is well worn, but the execution is smooth, and the results are reliably entertaining.

If you've seen reruns of *F Troop* and *M\*A\*S\*H*, you've seen the template for Omega Company: it's the outfit where the Space Legion assigns the problem troops that nobody else will take. But in the hands of Captain Willard Phule, maverick scion of an incredibly wealthy munitions empire, these odd men (and women and aliens) out have become a surprisingly successful team. This particular episode, though, also owes a good deal to the "caper movie" genre—and in fact would probably make a good caper movie itself.

That's because the company's new assignment is to guard a popular interstellar casino from a criminal takeover, and military-style action takes a back seat to a lively game of bluff and double bluff. There are Legionnaires disguised as dealers, actors disguised as Legionnaires, freelance con artists disguised as ordinary customers, and criminal masterminds both real and not so real hovering in the background. The fun arises from watching the game unfold, with move and countermove played out in lively style—until the criminals lose patience and kidnap Phule himself, at which point, it's time for a suitably pyrotechnic climax.

Asprin draws the humor for this series from his characters, not from an artificial flavoring of puns and wordplay. And he's got a good group of characters to draw on, from the quietly flamboyant Phule to

Beeker, his unflappable butler, to Moustache, the acting sergeant with a carefully assumed British accent and an unfailingly polite manner with cheaters ("If I might suggest, sir, it's unwise to keep an extra couple dozen pairs of dice in your luggage. . .").

In short, *Phule's Paradise* is simply a fun read, light without being vapid and clever without being heavy-handed. This series is Asprin's strongest to date, and it's off to a good start. — *J. Bunnell*

### THE BRIDGE

by John Skipp and Craig Spector  
Bantam  
419 pages, \$4.99 (paperback)

"*The Bridge* is a disaster novel on an epic scale!" Take the meaning of that phrase in any of its possible meanings and you'll be right.

First, the book is an eco-disaster story. A couple of guys are dumping toxic waste off a bridge in Paradise, Pennsylvania, when Mother Nature goes a bit bonkers and creates, from the stinking morass of waste materials, a sentient garbage-monster. Its touch is deadly, it perverts everything around it, and it starts off on the road to conquer the world: a familiar story line, and one that usually works. Skipp and Spector—as in their two best previous books, *The Light at the End* and *The Scream*—have a strong prose style, and handle the many multiple viewpoints deftly.

Unfortunately, the book's problems come from its structure. It's set up to be a message-novel and nothing more: POLLUTION IS BAD! POLLUTION IS BAD! POLLUTION IS BAD! gets a little monotonous when it's fed to the reader so forcefully, over and over again. One of the most striking things about the book is . . . there aren't really any sympathetic characters. The one viewpoint character who's basically a nice guy gets smushed (to borrow horror-writer Alan Rodgers's apt word) almost immediately, leaving only bad guys trying to contain the disaster, and the disaster itself spreading farther and farther out from Paradise.

Skipp and Spector seem to have forgotten a few of the basics of good storytelling: the reader must be able to identify with one or more sympathetic characters, and there should be a slight ray of hope at the end—if not in the situation (it is possible to have an utterly downbeat plot that works), at least in human nature (mankind can rise above itself).

Books can have messages and still work as fiction: witness *Brave New World* or *1984*. Messages travel best when disguised as entertainment; when that's not done, you have unpleasant fiction. That was my basic reaction here: it's gripping, but unpleasant, and I went away with more of an aversion to this type of story than to pollution. For the more easily swayed, there is an environmental appendix, which tells you how to find magazines and organizations which will help save the world.

In the context of Skipp and Spector's career, however, *The Bridge* is a definite step forward: their previous two books, *The Cleanup* and *Deadlines*, are best forgotten. (The "other books by" section in the front of *The Bridge* only lists *The Scream* [a powerful satanic-rock-band story], *The Light at the End* [a strong vampire-in-New York story], and their best-selling zombie-fest anthology *Book of the Dead*.) *The Bridge* has a more or less linear storyline that readers can follow, better characterization than the two previous books, and a structure if not a good structure.

*The Bridge* is probably for diehard Skipp-and-Spector fans only. Their next book, rumored to be a modern-scene werewolf story, sounds more promising. If it's as good as their modern-scene vampire book, that's the one readers will want to, um, gobble up. — *J. Betancourt*

### GIVE ME LIBERTY:

AN AMERICAN DREAM  
by Frank Miller and Dave Gibbons  
Dell Graphics  
\$16.00 (full-color trade paperback)

When friends found out I had reviewed a graphic novel (*The Adventures of Professor Thintwhistle* and

*His Incredible Aether Flyer*, March 1992)—the first I'd read in some years, since I don't generally follow graphic novels—I suddenly found myself given a dozen more or so to read. I chose one with Frank Miller's name prominently displayed, since I recalled enjoying his reworking of the Batman myth.

Unfortunately, while I imagine most comic-book fans will enjoy *Give Me Liberty*, I'm not sure I liked it enough to sample another graphic novel. There's just not enough *new* here, and I don't feel the medium is being effectively used.

The revolution in graphic novels seems to consist primarily of giving more adult treatment to stories. A touch of nudity, a few obscenities, a few neuroses for the characters: just like real life, right?

Not really. While the ability to handle adult subject matter is fine, it's also important to do something with it that has at least a modicum of originality to it.

The plot of *Give Me Liberty* can briefly be summed up as: In a future controlled by an evil President of the U.S., the poor are locked up in self-contained welfare communities, from which they cannot escape except by joining the military. Martha Washington, a black girl, is pretty smart and looks like she might have a future if only she were in the outside world. When her favorite teacher is brutally murdered, she kills his attacker—but is severely traumatized in the process. She finds another way out: insanity. She is institutionalized. In the asylum, she wanders into an off-limits area and finds a group of mutants telepathically controlling equipment. Before she is thrown out, she briefly communicates with one.

After the President and most of his cabinet are assassinated, a pro-environmentalist succeeds him and sets about making the world a better place. Martha—now enrolled in the army—ends up in South America fighting greedy corporations that are trying to destroy the rain forest. One of her superiors is secretly a corporate agent, but she foils his plans . . . et cetera.

Also missing is an element I call "scope"—the ability of the book to stretch your mind, to make you see things in a different way, or on a scale you wouldn't reach on your own. One example of "scale" from prose science fiction leaps immediately to mind: In David Brin's *Star-tide Rising*, we have humans exploring a planet in search of alien artifacts. The aliens planned to have whatever artifacts they left behind destroyed by the movement of continental plates, where one plate was moving over another. These beings weren't thinking hundreds or even thousands of years into the future; they were thinking on a scale larger than we do. The realization was a mind-expanding shock.

*Give Me Liberty*'s example of thinking on a grand scale is to have corporate fighters attack in a forty-foot-tall "fat boy" advertising statue clutching a soda and burger in hand. (Never mind the illogic of having such a monstrosity in a rain forest, or trying to fight from inside it!) The vast reaches of the rain forest itself are totally ignored; there is no spectacle, no panoramic view, no grand visions of the world being destroyed. For what is essentially a visual medium, the cinematography (for lack of a better word) is unremarkable. Graphic novels need a pairing of the intensely visual and the culturally iconographic—paint in primary colors on a broad canvas, visuals for the mind as well as the eye.

*Give Me Liberty* is basically an action-adventure movie in the guise of SF. You could remove many of the science-fiction elements and have the same story, set in today's world—which isn't to say it's bad, or even wrong; just not novel enough to interest hard-core science-fiction readers, or those who want something from a graphic novel other than more of the same. — *J. Betancourt*

#### UBIK

by Philip K. Dick  
216 pages

#### A SCANNER DARKLY

by Philip K. Dick  
278 pages

#### THE THREE STIGMATA OF PALMER ELDRITCH

by Philip K. Dick  
230 pages

All published by Vintage  
Each priced at \$10 (trade paperback)

Philip K. Dick was, without a doubt, one of the most distinctive voices in modern science fiction, and the field has been the poorer for it since his death almost a decade ago at age 54. Over the last ten years, his reputation as one of the thinkers of the literary field has continued to grow at home and abroad . . . yet his books have been becoming harder and harder to find.

Why? Because they were scattered among many different publishers, who didn't have a coherent marketing plan for Dick's work. Over the last few years, as his novels went out of print and the rights to them reverted to Dick's estate, Dick's literary agent has been quietly sitting on them. Finally enough have accumulated to make it worth a publisher's while to reissue them together.

Vintage is, obviously, the publisher doing the reissue program—an interesting choice, since the company is known primarily for publishing Literature. Already available in trade paperback is the *Valis* trilogy; three new titles have just been released.

*Ubik* is my favorite of this set—a weird, metaphysical novel where reality is never quite what it seems to be, and *Ubik* (a strange universal product) is everywhere. *A Scanner Darkly* is a bizarre drug-trip novel, as a cop goes undercover to track down a dealer of a mind-splitting drug . . . and becomes what he seeks. *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* is a weird religious novel about a most unpleasant drug-crazed future.

It's interesting that drugs, the nature of reality, and religion are major components of the best of Dick's work, and are present here in huge quantities. He's often best in small doses, and any of these titles is a good place to start. — *J. Betancourt*



# Against the Night

Part 1 of 2

V. E. Mitchell

"Afternoon mail, my lord. And begging your pardon, but almost everyone else has left." Lieutenant Commander George Lawton, Commodore Louis Mountbatten's stocky, red-haired senior A.D.C., handed his commanding officer the afternoon's reports and memos. The stack was smaller than usual; most of Combined Ops had been given a half day leave for the holiday, war or no war. "And a Twelfth Night card from your mother, though one wonders why she would send it here."

"Indeed," Mountbatten agreed absently, running a hand through his dark, curly



Illustration by David Martin

hair. With the interruption, he became aware of the stillness normally occupied by office noises: muted conversations, the chatter of the teletypes, and the clatter and bells of the typewriters. He glanced toward the clock—1530—and noticed the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II was still askew from Hitler's last V-4 attack. The triangle of pale beige against the darker, streaked paint on the rest of the wall emphasized how many hours he and his staff had spent here in the last nine months, designing assault craft, planning multi-service attack strategies, and brainstorming innovations to aid the Allied war effort.

Mountbatten paused for a moment, studying the queen's face. She seemed impossibly young in the official portrait, taken just days after her father's death. King George VI had been killed during a surprise Nazi attack last August while he was inspecting the Royal Navy installations at Dover. Despite all precautions, the king and several of his key advisors had died when a 1,000-pound parachute-dropped mine had destroyed the bomb shelter where they were waiting out the attack. Remembering the Nazi declaration of victory following the tragedy, Mountbatten suppressed a grin. The Nazis had expected the war-weary English to surrender when faced with the prospect of a nineteen-year-old girl as their queen. Instead, the country had rallied around their new sovereign and Elizabeth, in a series of moving speeches, had catalyzed the grief and anger over the king's death into a sense of unity and determination unmatched since the early months of the war.

This time, Mountbatten allowed a grin of pride to spread across his handsome features. Elizabeth was a fighter, no question about that, and she was also a fast learner. Before her first few speeches, she had come to him for advice on content and delivery; many of the news photographs had shown Mountbatten, tall and muscular, doubly imposing in his Naval dress whites, hovering at the queen's elbow in his guise of advisor and courtesy uncle. With a start, he realized Elizabeth had not requested his advice on a speech in over three months—nor, if results were the judge, had she needed it.

Mountbatten brought his attention back to the afternoon post. Separating the square envelope from the official reports, he blinked and took a second look at the typed address. "That's odd. I would think . . ." His voice trailed off as he took out the single sheet of paper.

"5 Jan. 1946. Commodore Mountbatten," it read in an anonymous typescript, "Your wife has been keeping company with a Nazi spy. Unless you surrender your information on Project Habbakuk, we will be forced to expose her activities and destroy you the way your father was destroyed in 1914. Schmidt."

"Lawton, get on the phone and have Intelligence send someone over here. Immediately." Mountbatten's voice was calm, but his face had gone stiff from anger. Mention of the unfounded accusations against his German-born father always rekindled the humiliation his entire family had felt when Prince Louis had been forced to resign as First Sea Lord, the professional head of England's Royal Navy. Without that reminder, he could have viewed the slur against Edwina as the tasteless joke it was.

"Yes, my lord."

"And get Captain Michaels back here at once. We have a problem in his section that must be resolved before it jeopardizes our entire operation."

"Captain Michaels has not yet left his office, my lord. I'll send him in."

While he waited for Michaels, Mountbatten reviewed the plans for the project, trying to decide what the Nazis wanted to get from him. Habbakuk was the code name for Combined Operations' plan to build an aircraft carrier from a piece of the Greenland ice shelf. When finished, the *H.M.S. St. George* would be three thousand feet long by two thousand feet wide and would carry two hundred aeroplanes and six thousand men. Once equipped, the carrier would skirt the edge of the Arctic Ocean, appearing at Arkhangelsk off the northern Russian coast with the troops and materiel to reopen the Russian front and to liberate Nazi-controlled Stalingrad. The city was strongly defended, having been held by the enemy since the Russian counterattack had stalled in the bitter spring of 1943; after Stalin's assassination, the Russian generals had squandered their energies against each other, trying to determine who would control Russia. As a result, the Nazis remained firmly entrenched along a broad front from just west of Leningrad in the north to Stalingrad in the south. Unless they recaptured the resources of the Ukraine and the Caucasus, the Allies could not hope to defeat the Nazis. The success of the Russian invasion depended on secrecy; the *St. George* could not run from danger the way a smaller vessel could, but once it reached its battle station, the carrier's immense operational area offset the disadvantages of maneuvering the unwieldy craft into position.

Mountbatten pulled out the project's timetable. On 8 January 1946, he was to fly to Iceland to review the final tests and approve the construction site. He would present his report to the Allied High Command for their review on Tuesday the 15th, and they would give their final approval for the project on the following Monday. If everything went according to schedule, construction would begin on 1 February 1946, and the *St. George* would be launched in early June for its month-long voyage around northern Scandinavia. Mountbatten shook his head. The scheduling was tight—Heaven knew, almost impossibly tight—but there was no other way to preserve Habbakuk's element of surprise. By the same token, if construction were delayed, the Allies might not be able to use the *St. George* as their initial base to send men and materiel to Moscow for the attack on Stalingrad. In the worst case, if the project were delayed too long, summer would arrive at the construction site before the ship was ready; the Allies would then be faced with the brutal choice of attempting the second front this year without adequate air and tactical support or postponing the Russian campaign for another year.

Mountbatten set the paper back on the pile. It still came back to the same questions: what did the Nazis already know about Habbakuk, where had they gotten their information, was one of Michaels's scientists passing information to the enemy, and what did 'Schmidt'

expect to gain with this clumsy blackmail attempt? He could not see any answers that made sense.

One look at the crowded common room of St. Bartholomew's Convalescent Hospital was enough to encourage a hasty retreat, Jawaharlal Nehru thought as he matched action to idea. He recognized several influential people in the audience, but none he wanted to see. Nehru had hoped to catch Edwina Mountbatten as the dedication ceremony ended, but with underestimated the length of the proceedings. As with all such events, the room was replete with those who felt they personally had built the convalescent center, and he could get no closer to Edwina than the door. The glare thrown off the room's fresh white paint hurt his eyes and, blurring Edwina's silhouette like heat waves, made her seem impossibly beyond his reach. At the hospital's entrance Nehru paused, listening to the conclusion of her speech. Her voice sounded rough, hoarse, like a cello played too long with a worn-out bow.

For a moment, he let the sound wash over him, not even trying to decipher the words. "*It was just my standard speech—the one I use for all those occasions,*" she had written to describe half a dozen such dedications in the last year. "*But the audience loved it, and if what I say makes them work harder for the war effort, I'm all for it.*"

The sound of applause pulled Nehru back to the present. Edwina had concluded her speech and was making her way off the makeshift stage. The crowd surged forward, engulfing her in an overdressed, oversentimental tide, each person eager for a final word or the chance to ask a favor. Nehru glanced around, breathing in the pristine newness of the hospital. If only for this night, St. Bartholomew's was one of the few places in England not battered and bloodied by seven interminable, bitter years of warfare.

The rising sound of voices warned him that the first people had reached the common room door. Not wanting to be trapped by conventional formalities, Nehru let his politician's instincts dictate his escape. To avoid advertising his movements, he had ducked out of Commonwealth House without his usual retinue of guards and aides. However, even wearing a heavy overcoat and a soldier's winter cap to hide his nearly bald head, Nehru had little doubt that his slight stature and dark skin would broadcast his identity to the society sharks indubitably present at the dedication. To be with Edwina, he had stolen these few precious moments from his hectic schedule, and he did not want to waste them on meaningless courtesies.

Outside, it was cold and the heavy fog wrapped the concrete hospital in a pall of filthy wool. Nehru sheltered in his waiting car until the tag ends of the crowd spilled down the steps of the building. The thickest knot of people resisted the flow, moving by jerks and spasms when too many were caught behind the embolism. Nehru stood, waiting against the car until he was noticed.

The crowd shifted, at last giving Nehru a clear view of Edwina. Trim and slender in her dark uniform, her auburn hair neatly in place beneath her round, narrow-

brimmed hat, she looked like a woman half her age. She turned in his direction, seeing him for the first time. Her face went from disbelief to surprise to joy in the space of three heartbeats. Impatiently brushing off the last importunate questions, she came to him, drawn by a need as strong as his own.

"Jawaharlal." Her voice was harsh from overuse and tightly controlled emotion. Without the merciful glamour of the fog, Nehru saw how cruelly wrong his initial perception had been. Her face was drawn and chalky beneath a dusting of rouge, and hidden behind her thick spectacles, her eyes had the bruised look of someone worn beyond the limits of endurance.

"Edwina." His voice caught. He swallowed and tried again. "Your audience seemed to appreciate what you said to them."

Her shoulder twitched in a half-shrug. "It's the same speech I always give. They wanted the Queen, but of course Lillibet is too busy. So they got me."

"You are a queen." He reached for her hand, pressed it against his lips. "The Queen of India."

She snorted, amused by their old joke. At Mountbatten's investiture as the last Viceroy of India, Nehru had observed with characteristic shrewdness that Imperial law might define Mountbatten as the sovereign's deputy, but that neither Lord nor Lady Louis were inclined to play second fiddle to anyone. Half in jest, he had called Edwina "Queen of India." During the Mountbattens' vicereignty, Nehru's respect for them had deepened to a strong and vital friendship. By the time they returned to England to assume their current wartime assignments, Nehru's half-joking title for Edwina had shifted to the highest compliment he could give her: "Queen of India—and of my heart."

The memory of those happier days stabbed at Nehru. India—and Edwina. India—his home, his country—a land of violent contrasts and tranquil moods, of stark vistas and stunning panoramas, a land as magnificent and varied and changeable as the woman he loved. A land Edwina loved as much as he. Thanks to the Mountbattens, his India was now free and independent, an equal participant in the theatre of world events. To have received that gift was a miracle he was still trying to comprehend. The deeper wonder was Edwina's love for him. Seeing the warmth in her blue eyes, eyes as bright and clear as the spring skies over Delhi, made him wish to lay India at her feet and then spend a lifetime exploring that gift with her. *Would that we could!* So much the war had taken from them, he thought with deep regret. So many hopes and dreams and possibilities. So many chances for which he would trade his soul to have again. Before Edwina could follow the direction of his thoughts, Nehru reached into the car and retrieved his gift.

The bronze chrysanthemum was a blaze of color in a day otherwise bleached to drab monochrome by the fog-muffled light. Edwina clutched both hands around the stem, knuckles sharp and white through her pale skin. She bowed her head over the blossom, but not before Nehru saw the diamond-bright tears brimming her eyes. "It's beautiful, Jawaharlal," she whispered.

"It's really nothing." Sensing the raw edge of her emotions, he felt compelled to downplay his gesture. "I had to steal it from the Palace gardens this afternoon." He took her elbow and guided her into the car, sliding close to her as the driver, his aide Ramesh Khan, closed the door.

"Forgive me," she murmured, removing her spectacles and rubbing her eyes. "It's been a long day already."

Apprehension jolted Nehru. That her pride allowed her to concede even that little indicated how deeply fatigued she was. Nehru pulled her closer, needing to hold her, to feel her body against his. She removed her hat and snuggled against him, pillowing her head against his shoulder. His arm tightened around her, feeling her thinness, the sharp angles of bones covered with too little flesh. Pain and denial warred for control in his mind. He hid his face in her soft hair, drinking in the mingled scents of soap, smoke, and musky perfume. For a time, he let the familiar, beloved smells carry him back to India, to a time and place where it was within his power to hold this woman safe from everything that threatened her. By the time Nehru had mastered his fears, Edwina had fallen asleep, cuddled against him like a small child.

Captain John Torrance needed half an hour to make his way from Army Intelligence through London's fog-shrouded streets to Commodore Mountbatten's office, arriving just as Mountbatten's war conference with Captain Michaels ended. Torrance, all blond good looks and husky muscles, blew into the room with the force of a North Sea gale. "What a brute of a fog! Dickie, shouldn't you be letting these poor chaps leave while they can still see to find their way home?"

Mountbatten winced at the use of his family nickname. He tolerated Torrance's familiarity because Edwina's sister Marie seemed happy with the fellow, but Torrance's presumption of family privileges in anticipation of the wedding rankled. "A slight delay, John. Official business." Mountbatten tossed the letter across his green steel desk. "What do you make of this?"

Torrance fielded the paper and read through it twice. "That's a nasty accusation. You tell me what it means, Dickie. A professional out to get the plans would scarcely advertise his interest. What is Habbakuk?"

Mountbatten shook his head, not at all unhappy to refuse Torrance's request. "Sorry. That's on a 'need to know' basis. You're not cleared. It suffices to say, February first is the commitment date."

"And publicity could be awkward?"

"More like fatal. If word gets out, the High Command may scrap the entire project."

"Is there any basis for Schmidt's threat?"

Mountbatten shrugged. From a lifetime in the public eye, he knew unpleasant allegations were easily made and all too easily believed. Even false accusations created difficulties he did not need at the moment. Probably Schmidt was counting on that to force his compliance. "I'll ask Edwina, of course, though I hardly think it's likely."

"You know her better than I do." Torrance's skepticism

leaked into his voice. He had been seeing Edwina's younger sister since Marie's husband was killed in the First Blitz, and he acted as though that relationship gave him a perspective on Edwina's character that her husband lacked. "But why would she tell you?"

"Why not?" Mountbatten's jaw set in a stubborn line.

"Even if it were true, their secrets are in greater danger than ours. As you well know, her grandfather was a German Jew, and she has no sympathy for Hitler's cause."

"I don't suppose . . ." Torrance paused, then shook his head. "No, the piece in the evening *Express* wouldn't be connected."

"The *Express*? What's the *Express* have to do with this?" Mountbatten glared at Torrance, willing him to surrender his information after so carefully discounting it. With a show of reluctance, Torrance pulled a newspaper from his briefcase.

Mountbatten unfolded the paper. A dark, blurred picture filled the upper left corner, under the headline: "Military hero's wife seen with Nazi spy." He studied the picture, looking for clues. The haggard, dark-haired woman in the St. John Ambulance Brigade uniform resembled Edwina physically, but the photograph was so poor that Mountbatten would not have staked tuppence on the woman's identity. Her companion was well disguised by a hat and overcoat, and Mountbatten wondered if even the man's relatives would recognize his indistinct profile. It was far easier to name the district of London where the picture was taken and to estimate from the bomb damage how old the photo was. Clearly, Torrance had mentioned the photo to annoy him, because its connection with Mountbatten's anonymous correspondent was at best tenuous. Mountbatten returned the paper to Torrance. "One hopes your work is usually based on higher quality evidence than that, Captain Torrance."

Torrance accepted the rebuke. "We'll need to recheck the security clearances on your staff—everyone connected with the project. There's obviously a leak somewhere."

"Lieutenant Commander Lawton has the files for you already. He'll give you whatever assistance you need."

"Thank you, Commodore." With his assignment before him, Torrance was all business. "I'll have my preliminary report for you in the morning."

"Very good." Mountbatten dropped a stack of reports into his briefcase and started for the door. "If you need anything more, I'll be at home."

He strode down the corridor, snapping off a quick response to Lawton's farewell salute. He paused at the door to exchange Twelfth Night greetings with the security guard, then stepped out into the raw night. The street was a narrow red-brick canyon, dank blood-dark walls disappearing at both ends into the dense fog. Torrance's three-wheeled Morgan from the Army motor pool was the only vehicle at the curb. Mountbatten frowned until he remembered his driver mentioning an intermittent magneto problem with the car. In this damp weather, neither humans nor their machines seemed to operate at top efficiency.

A high-pitched whistle, faint but growing in volume, caught his attention. Instinct took over. Mountbatten hit

the ground, protecting his ears, even before his conscious mind identified the sound of a V-4A minibomb cluster. Given the accuracy of the V-4A's, a cluster of fifteen minibombs would break up and scatter over an area with a half-mile radius, and the sound overhead gave him no clues to his distance from the dispersal point.

The explosion was close and shattering, followed by a second, fainter detonation. Glass and steel fragments rained down on Mountbatten, peppering his overcoat and slicing any exposed skin. Grimly, he held his tucked position until the debris quit falling.

At the touch of hands on his shoulder, he sat up. Torrance's car blazed with silent, crimson fury from the direct hit. The flames reflected off the broken shards of every window in the block, turning the street into a sea of glittering, bloody rubies. Mountbatten's hands went to his ears, as if searching for the ear protectors that screened out all sound. Then he realized that the faint whisper he had been ignoring was the guard yelling over and over, "My lord! My lord, are you all right?"

After an hour of creeping through the fog, Nehru's car arrived at the St. John Ambulance Brigade's headquarters at 7 Belgrave Square. Though he was reluctant to disturb Edwina, Nehru lifted his head to peer at the gray stone building. His movement roused her. She rubbed her eyes and straightened, looking around to see where she was. "Forgive me," she murmured in a chagrined tone. "It was terribly rude of me to fall asleep on you."

"Not at all," Nehru gave her a tender smile. "I enjoyed not having to share you with St. John's, and the Red Cross, and the Relief Society, and all those other organizations that take up so much of your time."

Edwina chuckled. "You make me sound perfectly horrible." She reached for her hat and spectacles, settled them into place, and by touch smoothed her hair.

"I am serious, Edwina. Won't you please take a rest for a few days?"

"How can I, when there's so much to do and no one else to do it? We're started up a new system of convalescent centers to handle the casualties from France. Someone has to coordinate the efforts to accommodate the new divisions the Americans will be sending. And Dickie wants me to organize the civilian relief efforts for the Russian campaign this summer. That last is classified, by the way. So with all that, how can I possibly consider taking any time off? No one else is, just because they're doing a lot for the war effort."

"Of course. You're right." When Edwina decided where her duty lay, he knew it was impossible to argue with her. Abruptly, Nehru shoved the car door open and got out. Reaching for Edwina's hand, he helped her to her feet. For a moment, they stood, hands locked together, lost in each other's eyes and oblivious of the dreary London night closing in around them.

Edwina broke the spell by murmuring, "Dinner at eight."

Nehru nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He lifted her hand to his lips for a farewell kiss, then stood

watching her as she climbed the worn stairs and disappeared into the old building.

He never heard the footsteps approaching. A hard, muscular arm in an Army-issue overcoat circled his chest, and a keen line of icy metal pressed against his throat. From the corner of his eye, Nehru saw the vague bulk of another man in an overcoat, his Enfield trained on Khan. Cold sweat trickled down Nehru's neck. "If you move or say anything, mate, I'll cut yer throat now. The same happens if yer driver goes for his gun." The accent sounded Australian, Nehru thought, but not genuinely Australian. He could not quite place what was wrong with the imitation, and admitting that ignorance added to his fear.

Taking Nehru's silence and Khan's stillness for assent, Nehru's captor continued. "Me and some of me mates was talking, see, and we don't like it for a nigger to be hangin' around with her ladyship. 'Specially not one of our Injian brothers what suddenly thinks he's as good as an Englishman. That's not what we's fighting this war about, see?"

The knife pressed harder into Nehru's throat. Fear and anger warred for control of his muscles. Although he could not fathom the man's reasons, Nehru realized his captor wanted to provoke him, to enrage him into making a foolish attack against knife and gun, and the taunts were calculated to achieve the desired effect. Nehru fought his instincts, struggling to remain motionless and show his tormenter no reaction. After a minute or so, the Australian gave a disgusted grunt. "Pacifist coward!" The knife left Nehru's throat and a sharp blow sent him face first into the back seat of the car. "If you value yer yellow skin, tell his lordship to surrender Habbakuk." The man chuckled, sounding viciously pleased with himself. "Or the next time, I *will* use the knife."

Running footsteps merged with the sound of an engine. Two car doors slammed in sequence as Nehru struggled to right himself. Khan shoved his door open and jumped to his feet, Webley in hand, firing at the escaping men. At close range, the gun's report was shattering, but the bullets apparently missed their mark. By the time Nehru could see out the window, the other vehicle had dwindled to two pale taillights rapidly fading into the fog.

Michaels and Lawton had summoned a surgeon to dress Mountbatten's wounds, fortunately all superficial, and to evaluate his hearing loss. Mountbatten had fretted about the time he was wasting, but discovered his subordinates had developed a sudden, selective deafness of their own. Even before the doctor arrived, Mountbatten had regained partial hearing in his right ear, and no one could gainsay his wishes once the last plaster was in place. He ordered his car and headed home with his briefcase bulging with work.

Much later, Mountbatten was roused from his reports by the three Sealyham terriers racing from the wood-paneled study. He glanced at the mantle clock: 10:20 P.M. Faint but thankfully clear, Edwina's voice floated through the open door as she greeted her dogs. "Mizzen, there's

a good boy. Get down, Jib. Yes, you're a fine fellow. And such a nice girl, Kelly."

"Edwina, could you come here for a minute?"

She entered the study, with the dogs clustered around her ankles. Her uniform looked as crisp as when she had left the house fifteen hours earlier and every strand of her auburn hair was still in place, but her face was chalky and lined with fatigue. She aimed a kiss at his forehead and perched on the edge of his oak desk. Her eyes widened as she saw the cuts on his face and hands, but her opening line was neutral. "Is something wrong?"

Not sure how to answer her concern about his injuries, Mountbatten moved to resolvable issues. "The afternoon post had a note accusing you of seeing a Nazi agent. Do you know of anything that could be behind it?"

"Not a clue. I see hundreds of people every time I inspect a hospital. How should I know if one of them is a Nazi?"

"Darling, you know that isn't what I meant."

"Would this alleged spy tell me who he is?" Her voice took on an impatient note. "Are they so stupid they don't think I'd turn an informer in?"

Mountbatten closed his eyes briefly. When Edwina was tired, she could be difficult. And as exhausted as she looked tonight, willpower was all that kept her on her feet. "It's important, darling. They wanted the plans for Habbakuk."

Her blue eyes widened. "Your iceberg ship? The entire second front depends on that."

He nodded. "I must know the basis for their threats, so I can find out who's giving them their information."

Edwina reached for a cigarette to occupy her hands. Finally, she shook her head. "You know my schedule. Official business. Inspections for St. John's; meetings for the Red Cross; inspections of the air raid shelters; meetings to beg supplies, and recruit volunteers, and convert space to new hospitals. More inspections." She took a long pull on her cigarette. "The only person I can remember seeing who wasn't directly involved with the medical program was Jawaharlal, and even that was more business than not. I was coaching him for his meeting with Winston."

Mountbatten gave her free hand a quick squeeze, grateful she had found a short time away from her other duties. "And how is Jawaharlal?"

"Coping. It's a long way from rebel orator to Prime Minister of India. And farther from passive resistance to military leadership."

"There wasn't any choice. We didn't have the troops to control India and keep the Japanese out of Australia and hold off Hitler."

She laid a finger across his lips. "I agree with you completely, Dickie. I always have. It's Winston who still isn't convinced we should have given India her freedom."

"And so I may not get the *St. George* when she's finished." Once tapped, the frustration came boiling out. "Edwina, that's my ship! Combined Operations has done its part for the war effort, and they'll start phasing it out now. It's time I got back to sea. I want that command!"

"I'll talk to Winston. Or, rather, we will—dinner, to-

morrow night. We're to give Jawaharlal moral support." Edwina stubbed out her cigarette and pushed herself off the desk. "If I think of anything that will help on the other, you'll know."

"Thanks, darling. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this in a day or two." He took another look at her tired face. "Shouldn't you go to bed now?"

"Can't. I still have to write today's reports. Tomorrow is morale visits to all the local hospitals. Cheering up the men who couldn't be released for the holiday. And an evening tour of the East End air raid shelters after we leave the PM's." She brushed the tip of her finger across one of the plasters on his hand. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Holiday gift from Adolf." He shrugged, downplaying the incident to avoid worrying her. "He must have been aiming for the Palace and got our street by mistake."

Edwina nodded, apparently accepting his explanation, and started to leave. He continued, "Speaking of Twelfth Night—I know we said we wouldn't, but your present is on the bed."

She turned in the doorway, a brilliant smile washing the exhaustion from her face. "By now, the Magus should have delivered yours, too. Happy Twelfth Night, Dickie." Her footsteps faded as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom. After a few moments, Mountbatten returned to his work. Time enough to investigate the gift after Edwina had taken a bath and finished writing her reports.

When Mountbatten awoke the following morning, Edwina was already gone. Her appointment calendar for the last year was at his place on the table with a note: "See if Torrance can make anything of this. I'll have Nancie copy off my schedule for the last week. E."

He flipped through the pages, trying not to smudge the ink on the cheap paper. After almost seven years of war, Edwina could not get an appointment book made half as well as many she would have rejected a decade before. The inferior paper compounded the difficulty of reading Nancie's cramped writing.

Mountbatten squinted and looked closer at her schedule for the previous day. The appointments were more crowded than his own and ran from eight A.M. until after six P.M.: staff reviews, two fund raising speeches, a hospital inspection, and the St. Bartholomew's dedication. Scrawled in the margin in Edwina's uneven hand was the notation: "Dinner with J! 8 P.M."

Mountbatten closed the book. Torrance would have a field day trying to unravel the notations in that calendar, and would doubtlessly find a hundred questionable entries. It would take him six months to investigate all his suspects. If the war truly depended on Torrance's results, Habbakuk would be postponed, and with it the chance for a fast victory on the reopened Russian Front. Without that victory, Mountbatten wondered if England could hold out much longer in this brutal war of attrition, even with America's help finally beginning to arrive. He rubbed a hand over his gritty eyes and put the defeatist thoughts firmly out of his mind. He would pass Edwina's



calendar on to Torrance, but he knew it contained no answers to the mystery.

A guard examined the security pass, then waved Nehru's car through the checkpoint. His driver turned the corner and they passed the cratered wreckage at 10 Downing Street, a casualty of the First Blitz, mercifully veiled by the relentless fog. The car pulled up at the porticoed front of 16 Downing Street as Mountbatten was handing Edwina from the Mountbattens' car. Nehru hurried to greet her, for the moment forgetting his trepidation at having dinner with England's formidable Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Edwina seemed more rested than she had the previous afternoon, and the warmth of her smile left Nehru feeling giddy with joy. When Mountbatten turned back to say something to his chauffeur, Edwina laced her fingers through Nehru's and pulled him toward the guarded door of the Prime Minister's residence.

Tires squealed as a car slewed around the corner at high speed. It swerved toward Nehru's car. The driver straightened his course, then gunned the engine. A pair of dull metallic objects arced from the window toward them. Time stretched as Nehru watched the grenades drift toward the flagstone sidewalk.

Mountbatten straightened at the sound of the car's approach. He saw a hooded man in the passenger's seat and the motion of something being thrown. Warning signals fired in his brain. Without conscious thought, he launched himself toward Nehru and Edwina, knocking them to the ground and shielding them with his body. The grenades exploded, spraying the area with shrapnel. The decorative stone pillars deflected most of the fragments away from them, but Mountbatten heard a scream as one of the sentries was hit.

Within seconds, the attack was over. Mountbatten climbed to his feet, brushing the dirt from his uniform. He scanned the street in both directions for more attackers, but the fog limited his visibility to a few yards. Although the odds were against it, an entire battalion of enemies could be hiding less than a block from their position and he would not be able to detect them. From the end of the street, Mountbatten heard tires squeal and an engine roar. The attackers' car crashed through the checkpoint and raced away, pursued by shots from the guards.

A door opened, then two more. From across the street, a squad of security guards came boiling out of a converted residence, Enfields at the ready. By ones and twos, the neighbors materialized from the fog to see what had happened.

"Edwina? Jawaharlal? Are you all right?" Mountbatten's voice was calm, in perfect control.

For several heartbeats, Nehru pressed himself to the pavement, glad to feel the wet sidewalk beneath his cheek. His breath came in short gasps, as he recovered from the impact and the shock of the attack. Finally, convinced he was still alive, Nehru pushed himself to a sitting position. He would be sore tomorrow, but his injuries were not permanent. He grasped Mountbatten's hand and allowed the taller man to help him to his feet.

"Thank you, Dickie. I am deeply grateful for . . ." Nehru's voice trailed off when he realized Mountbatten was not listening. He was staring over Nehru's shoulder, his face gone bloodless and his mouth twisted with anguish. Nehru turned, followed Mountbatten's gaze to Edwina's still-motionless form. "No," he moaned, dropping to his knees beside her.

"What happened, my lord?" asked the leader of the security force. Mountbatten forced his attention to the question, forced himself to give a calm and rational explanation, even though everything in his being cried to know how badly Edwina had been hurt.

Nehru fumbled to loosen Edwina's muffler. At first, his hands shook so badly that he could detect no pulse. He took a deep breath to calm himself and tried again, pressing his fingers against her smooth skin and willing her to be all right. This time, he found a feathery heart-beat. "Weak. Erratic," he whispered, then repeated louder for Mountbatten's benefit. Gently, he probed her forehead, searching for injuries. She stirred and whimpered when his fingers touched a spot over her left eye.

The door of Number 16 burst open. A short, stocky man, followed by a skinny shadow, charged out. "Dickie Mountbatten," Winston Churchill demanded, "what's the meaning of all the noise out here? Can't you do anything quietly?" The spate of words halted when Churchill saw Edwina's inert form on the sidewalk. "My God! Who's responsible for this?" He turned to the surviving guard and barked out a string of orders for reinforcements, medical personnel, and Intelligence investigators.

When Churchill paused for breath, his secretary interrupted, "Mr. Prime Minister, you must get inside. They may try another attack."

Churchill brushed off his secretary's advice and continued the flood of orders. As the sentry collected himself and hurried to obey, Churchill turned on Mountbatten. "What are you waiting for, Dickie? Let's get her inside before they decide to have another go at you."

Mountbatten shook off the security force. He knelt beside Edwina, checking her injuries before he moved her. All he could find was the lump on her forehead. The knot in his stomach loosened as he realized she had not been hit by stray shrapnel. He took her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. For a moment, his eyes met Nehru's and a look of profound understanding passed between them.

"Don't take so confoundedly long, Dickie," Churchill barked. "Your position out there is completely exposed."

Mountbatten stood, struggling for a moment with his burden. Then, with Nehru's support, he found his balance and they hurried for the safety of Churchill's residence.

Once inside, Edwina revived quickly. Dismissing everyone's concern with a characteristic "Don't be silly; I just fell wrong," she refused to let Churchill disrupt the evening's plans on her account. Nehru and Mountbatten exchanged worried looks, fearing what she was hiding behind her display of will, but the Prime Minister outmaneuvered her. "Seeing as Dickie and Mr. Nehru are going to be busy for the next hour or so talking to Army

Intelligence, I insist that you allow me to attend you, my dear." With that, he escorted her to the family's private sitting room and installed her in his favorite overstuffed chair. Shortly, a messenger informed Mountbatten that the Intelligence officers had arrived. When he left, Mountbatten carried away with him the image of England's Prime Minister hovering over his wife like a lovestruck boy half her age. Judging from the smile on Churchill's rotund face, the Prime Minister was enjoying his own performance immensely.

By the time he returned an hour later, Mountbatten was in a foul mood. Brought on by his efforts to keep his discussions with John Torrance on civil terms, a fierce headache was clawing at his temples. If he had had to endure five more minutes of Torrance's maddening presence, the military police *might* have found Torrance's body floating face down in the Thames tomorrow morning.

Taking the cigar Churchill offered him, Mountbatten crossed to the fireplace. He leaned against the rough bricks, staring morosely into the flames. After several minutes of letting the banter between Churchill and Edwina flow over him, the knotted tension in Mountbatten's gut eased. He looked around the room, seeing how shabby it had become and how little of the furniture matched any more. Even before wartime austerity had taken its toll, this of all the rooms in the Prime Minister's residence had been furnished with an eye toward comfort; now, Churchill's favorite chairs were positively dilapidated and only the blackout curtains showed no signs of heavy use.

Churchill was telling anecdotes of his latest run-ins with Parliament, colorful and delivered with his unique flair. Edwina laughed at a particularly apt characterization and Mountbatten turned his head to watch her from the corner of his eye. Her face was unusually pale and there was a tightness around her eyes that often presaged a migraine. Given how he felt after dealing with Torrance, Mountbatten could imagine how much Edwina's head hurt from the crack against the sidewalk. He wished she had not been so quick to refuse a complete medical exam from the doctor Churchill had summoned.

Nehru entered. He glanced around the room, then joined Mountbatten by the fireplace. His face was stiff and his expressive mouth was compressed into a hard, angry line. "I would like to be told how I managed to throw those grenades while being a victim of the attack," he said in a low voice.

Mountbatten snorted. "You, too? I was amazed at how he accused you while not mentioning your name. And I too would like an explanation for why Captain Torrance is so convinced you are at the bottom of this. His infernal conviction is beginning to get on my nerves."

Nehru shook his head, his forehead wrinkling in a puzzled frown. "I am completely at a loss to explain his suspicions, Dickie. I do not know what information he has that could possibly support—"

"No!" Mountbatten gripped Nehru's shoulder hard. "That's not what I meant. It is not anything you've done." Mountbatten drew a deep breath and dropped

his hand to his side. The germ of an idea stirred in his brain, but he could not force it into coherence. He shrugged, knowing the thought would come to him if he gave it time to solidify. "I'm getting sick of Torrance's infernal questions and with how he keeps turning up like a nicked shilling."

"He is quite persistent, I must admit."

Mountbatten nodded and flung the stub of his cigar into the fireplace, wishing he could dispose of John Torrance so easily. The unformed thought snapped into focus. Torrance's opinions were a little strong for someone to express to a superior officer, even if that superior officer was related to one's future wife. What that meant, Mountbatten did not know, but he decided to have a trusted subordinate check on Torrance in the morning. Why Torrance thought he could get away with such impudence would certainly be enlightening. Equally, it would be educational to know why Torrance had not seemed concerned about where the attackers had gotten the pass which had cleared their car through the security checkpoint. Suddenly, Mountbatten realized he had not heard the last thing Nehru had said to him. "Beg pardon?"

Nehru glanced toward Edwina, then back at Mountbatten. "I said, I fear the excitement tonight was not good for Edwina. She seems to be working much too hard."

"We all are. I can't do anything to stop her," Mountbatten said, his tone bleak. "You should take her back to Delhi with you. For a rest."

Nehru studied the toe of his shoe to avoid looking at Mountbatten. "I did try to suggest it. She wouldn't even consider it."

"Christ! I can command an entire naval fleet, but not my own wife. What must I do to protect her?"

"Dickie. Mr. Nehru. Drinks are served." Churchill joined them, a glass in each hand. Mountbatten took his and sipped it, noting with surprise that it was pre-war Scotch, not "Liberty Beer." Churchill continued in a quieter tone. "Dickie, you really should take better care of Edwina. When was the last time you gave her a day off?"

For a moment, Mountbatten was nonplused. Churchill knew Edwina better than to think she would listen to her husband's recommendation on how to arrange her schedule. Forcing a smile, he said, "Surely, Mr. Prime Minister, you don't expect me to dispute my superior officer on that subject."

Churchill chuckled. "I see your point, Dickie. There's nothing else for it. I will have to pull rank on her myself." He turned away, his shoulders squared with determination.

Mountbatten glanced toward Nehru. The Indian's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. "Want to bet on the winner?" Nehru mouthed the words without vocalizing. After he thought a moment, Mountbatten shook his head. He was certain Churchill would have no better luck than he and Nehru had had, but the contest of wills promised to be most entertaining.

Holiday and its climax notwithstanding, Mountbatten's next two days passed in a blur of activity. Habbakuk

was Combined Operations' biggest project, but it was by no means their only one. By the time he felt his department could function without him for a few days, Mountbatten was almost relieved to slip incognito aboard an American C-47 returning to the States. The flight to Iceland was uneventful, with nothing more to claim his attention than the pile of reports he had brought with him. Keeping with the cover for his travel plans, he slipped off the C-47 when it made its refueling stop at Keflavik.

The five days at Keflavik were much more eventful, crammed as they were with meetings and reviews. He enjoyed touring the laboratories and watching the scientists demonstrate the strength tests on the wood-pulp-and-ice material that would form the major bulk of the *St. George*. The engineers showed him the design studies for the steel mesh which would reinforce the structure and keep the great ice ship from splitting apart. Other groups showed him the plans for the huge engines and the giant propellers; the provisions for camouflaging the aircraft hangars, the equipment and supply depots, and the troop barracks; and the methods devised to insulate the upper surfaces of the *St. George* from the exhaust of the aircraft. He reviewed and revised timetables, checked with the Americans on delivery dates for the steel Madson matting which would surface the runways, evaluated the piping layouts for the ammonia-based cooling system which was to be installed beneath the carrier's upper surface, and otherwise lost himself in the fascinating minutiae of the mammoth operation which was bringing his dream ship to life.

The highlight of the trip, however, was the flight to Greenland's Cape Brewster to inspect the three possible locations for building the *St. George*. His C-47 dawdled over each site, circling back to give Mountbatten time to examine the ice fields while Habbakuk's scientific advisors explained the advantages and disadvantages of each area. Back at Keflavik, Mountbatten threw himself into a final round of briefings to choose the construction site and to obtain the facts he needed for his presentation to the Allied High Command. When he boarded his plane for England, exhilarated by what he had accomplished, the project commander was already organizing the first cargo drops for the selected site.

The return flight from Iceland was rough. Racing to beat a storm front, the plane had pitched and yawed like the deck of a destroyer in heavy seas. Mountbatten, as he paused to thank the flight crew for their splendid job of handling the C-47 in spite of the weather, thought he had never been so glad to see England in his life. Or, rather, to not see it, since the fog was closing in fast. He bounded down the ramp and across the field to his waiting car.

"Welcome home, Dickie." John Torrance stood beside the three-wheeled staff vehicle, as welcome as a bishop at a stag party. "I thought you'd want the progress report on my investigation immediately."

"Yes, of course." Mountbatten slid into his seat, folding his long legs into the cramped space, and waited for Torrance to get in. In Iceland, he had almost forgotten

the mysterious letter and the effort to steal Habbakuk. Torrance's presence was almost as objectionable as his reason for meeting Mountbatten. Mountbatten signaled to his driver and the staff car pulled away with a slight jerk and a puff of blue smoke. "Have you had any luck catching Herr 'Schmidt'?"

"Not yet." Torrance turned toward Mountbatten. In the watery light, Torrance's pale skin and blond hair blended with the gray backdrop, giving his features a remote, sinister flatness. The illusion seemed oddly in keeping with his mission. Torrance shifted his legs to fill the unoccupied space between himself and Mountbatten. "Most of your staff came through the security check without a catch."

"I'm supposed to be surprised at that?" Mountbatten's voice held more sarcasm than he had intended. Torrance was crowding him, trespassing on his personal space. Mountbatten suspected he did it to provoke a reaction, although he did not understand what Torrance hoped to accomplish.

"I merely summarize our results," Torrance said with the precise, controlled tone of a parent talking to an unreasonable child. "However, I did find a number of questionable entries in Edwina's appointment schedule."

Mountbatten snorted. "I expected you would."

Torrance arched a silver-blond eyebrow. "Then you agree her activities are suspicious?" He sounded surprised, as though he had not believed that Mountbatten would let him discuss the subject.

"Not at all. I merely expected you to have questions." Mountbatten's tone was milder yet, a deceptive contrast to the tight grimace that twisted his face. Torrance's attack was coming straight down the track Mountbatten had predicted.

"You've got to admit some of the entries are suspect, Dickie." Torrance gave Mountbatten a half-shrug and a smile, as if apologizing for repeating facts they both knew. "My chaps have been totally unable to unravel several of them."

"Am I responsible for the competency of your subordinates?" Mountbatten asked, feeling the edges of his control begin to unravel. "Have you asked Edwina about any of your problems?"

Torrance scowled, an expression that turned his classic features into an ominous mask. "Isn't that a bit post-posterous? How do I know she'd tell me the truth?"

Mountbatten gave Torrance a smile as chilling as Greenland's ice fields. "How, indeed? What is the most questionable entry you found?"

"The one on Twelfth Night Eve," Torrance replied without hesitation. "The one that says, 'Dinner with J.' No one's been able to make anything of it."

"A dozen people could have answered that one for you. 'J.' stands for Jawaharlal Nehru. See how easy it is to explain, when you ask the right person." Mountbatten stared at Torrance with disgust as the Intelligence man carefully wrote the name in his notebook. His neat, precise writing was unaffected by the movement of the car.

"Nehru? The Indian PM? Then he's our man."

"I beg your pardon?" Mountbatten asked, a steely edge

slipping into his voice. Predictable or not, Torrance's presumption was becoming offensive.

"It's obvious." Torrance's tone implied a blind veteran from the Indian Mutiny would have seen the connection. "His anti-English sentiments are well known. Clearly, he's using his unnatural influence over Edwina to obtain secrets to sell to the Nazis."

Mountbatten stared at Torrance for a full minute, torn between anger and laughter. Even in the face of Mountbatten's skepticism, Torrance was holding to the pre-charted course. Mountbatten waited to answer until he could keep his voice level. "In the first place, Captain Torrance, let me remind you that I outrank you. If I ever hear you make such a preposterous accusation again, I will see that you're reduced to *Private* Torrance before you can draw your next breath. Mr. Nehru is the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of India and is as loyal to Queen Elizabeth as any other Commonwealth citizen. Don't forget that in future.

"In the second place, may I remind you that he was also at Number 16 the other night when we were attacked. In spite of your questions at the time, I should think that rather destroys your attempt to pin the blame on him. By the way, have you caught the person who threw those grenades yet?"

"We're still working on it, Dickie. We'll catch the people responsible, never fear. But back to Nehru. How can you defend him personally or politically? He's been attacking us verbally for decades; why should he change his tune overnight? And how can you be so blind to the way he debauches Edwina and abuses your trust? Marie says it's positively sickening, the way he carries on behind your back."

"Blind?" Mountbatten closed his eyes, remembering the glow in Edwina's eyes when she talked of Nehru and the special warmth in Nehru's tone when he spoke to her. The longing shook Mountbatten with a physical pain—to be in India, a thousand miles from this war, and to be enfolded by the profound love Edwina and Nehru wove around him. He swallowed, fighting to keep his emotions under control. The India he remembered was gone, scarred as deeply as England by the war, and no longer a haven of peace and safety. "I trust I understand my wife better than her sister does. For all her good qualities, there are times when Marie is a bloody little fool."

"But—"

"Drop it, *Private*. Concentrate your efforts where they will do some good. Personally, I'd suggest trying to catch the person who attacked us outside the PM's residence. . . . And one should be careful how one throws around the word 'debauch'—if you take my meaning."

"Yes, my lord," Torrance said through stiff lips, finally acknowledging Mountbatten's superior rank. He remained silent through the rest of the ride to Combined Operations' headquarters. Mountbatten turned away from Torrance, finding better company in the ghosts and skeletons of buildings that materialized from the fog, then flitted away. With blackout precautions in effect throughout London, it was difficult to tell which buildings were occupied and which abandoned.

When they reached Combined Ops headquarters, the building was nearly deserted. Mountbatten waved a cursory good-bye to Torrance, then checked the time: almost 2100. He entered his office, expecting it to be empty as well.

"Sir!" Lawton jumped to his feet and saluted.

"At ease, George. What's afoot?"

"I knew you'd be coming in for the daily reports before you went home." He pointed to the stack of papers on the corner of the desk, then handed Mountbatten several sheets of paper. "Captain Michaels wanted me to tell you a couple of things right off. Also, I thought you should see these. Captain Torrance didn't think they were important."

Mountbatten glanced at the papers he held. The top sheet read:

Monday, 7 Jan. 1946

Commodore Mountbatten,

Unless you give me the information I want, I will expose you and your wife as traitors. You have 10 days.

Schmidt

Mountbatten ruffled through the papers. The messages were identical; only the date and the time remaining changed. He pulled out the sheet from the bottom of the pile. It was dated the 14th.

"That was in this morning's post," Lawton said.

Mountbatten scowled and dropped the papers on his desk. He felt an unpleasant suspicion starting to coalesce in his mind. Before he could focus on it, a distant explosion rattled the office's windows. His scowl deepened as he realized there had been no warning siren; the rocket must have slipped past the damaged radar installation at Dover, which had been battered four days ago by V-3 rockets carrying five-hundred-pound bombs.

With England's survival at stake, he could not afford to squander his energy on Schmidt's petty blackmail. But unless the man was captured before he carried out his threats, Mountbatten would lose much valuable time assuring his superiors that the accusations were unfounded. "Not important? That deadline is three days away."

"Yes, my lord."

"Have you seen much of Captain Torrance's investigation?"

"No, my lord. He did rerun security checks on half the outfit, but he seemed more concerned about catching the spy he claims Lady Louis is seeing. Begging your pardon, my lord."

"That's all right, Lawton. I'm aware of his opinions, and I did ask what he was doing." Mountbatten stared at the stack of reports on his desk, realizing how late Lawton had stayed to give them to him. "You didn't need to wait for me, George. I was expecting to get these papers from the safe, and Captain Michaels could have put his report in with the others."

"I thought I should give you those letters myself. They didn't seem like the sort of thing to just leave lying around. And Captain Michaels said he didn't trust putting his in-

formation on paper. He would have stayed himself, but something important came up, my lord."

Mountbatten slid into his chair and pointed to another. "Have a seat, George. And then make your report."

Lawton perched awkwardly on the edge of the ancient chair, and it squealed in protest. "Well, my lord, it's like this. The other night, when the bomb hit Captain Torrance's car, both me and Captain Michaels were taken with the fact that he didn't seem very upset about it. I mean, he could as easily have been in the car. Then the captain and me realized there hadn't been any air raid sirens, either, and that seemed suspicious, too, even though an occasional low-flyer sneaks through. You didn't mention it, but we figured it was because you were a bit rattled from having such a close squeak. So, anyway, we checked and the one what hit here was the only minibomb cluster reported in all of London for the entire week. But the funny thing was, there were only six explosions instead of ten or twelve, which would have made an unusually high number of duds for that cluster. And every one of the hits what was reported was on open ground. That didn't seem too likely to us, my lord."

Mountbatten leaned forward, focusing his full attention on Lawton. "Is this headed where I think it is, Commander?"

"I don't know, my lord. I'm just telling this like it happened. After you told Captain Michaels to check up on Captain Torrance, he had me searching his files down at HQ. I didn't find much there, maybe not even as much as normal, and what I tried to follow up on didn't seem to go anywhere."

"Meanwhile, Captain Torrance was poking around our projects until Captain Michaels got really smoked, particularly given what questions Captain Torrance kept asking and how he kept ignoring our questions about how that bomb almost took you out. So Captain Michaels thought that, just maybe, there might be something Captain Torrance knew about things that we didn't. After thinking about it a bit, Captain Michaels got a couple of the engineers and asked them if they could fake up something so that it would look like a minibomb attack."

"And they succeeded?"

"Yes, my lord. They even figured out how to rig a broadcast of the sound the minibombs make when they're falling, and how to set it up to be triggered by a radio detonator."

"Is that so?" Fire lit in Mountbatten's blue eyes as he contemplated the scheme. It was an elegant, diabolically clever way to eliminate someone. Too many Londoners were still dying in the renewed Nazi air raids, which had been pounding the city sporadically since late August after an eighteen-month lull, for anyone to question one additional casualty, no matter how high-ranking.

"My lord?" Lawton's voice sounded hesitant, as if he were reluctant to disturb his commander's train of thought. "Captain Michaels wanted me to particularly mention that we can't *prove* that's what happened. It's just, well, we were suspicious when Captain Torrance wasn't at all interested in why that one bomb from a

musty dud set managed to almost hit our building." He shrugged diffidently. "I know we're a legitimate military target, but we hadn't been noticing that Adolf was all that accurate in delivering his presents, if you follow my meaning."

"I understand, Commander, and my commendations to both you and Captain Michaels for a first-rate piece of work. I understand why he wished to have the report presented verbally."

"Thank you, my lord." Lawton drew a deep breath and straightened to attention, betraying a sudden nervousness by his too-rigid posture. His chair screeched a loud protest. "And, my lord, I have something else to say, something for everyone in this outfit."

"Yes, Commander?" Mountbatten asked in a reassuring tone. Whatever Lawton had to say, it could hardly be more disturbing than the possible murder scheme he had already described.

"It's about Captain Torrance, my lord. It's hard to believe he hasn't already made up his mind that Lady Louis is doing something bad, what with some of the questions he's been asking. And there isn't one man who's served with you who hasn't received a kindness from her ladyship, or that doesn't owe her hospital work for saving his life or the life of someone close to him. What I'm trying to say, my lord, is Captain Torrance didn't seem much interested in anything that's happening now, even if that's what he's supposed to be investigating. But he asked a lot of questions about things that went on before the war, like it made some kind of difference."

Before the war? Mountbatten tried to remember what it had been like—the parties, the travel, a young and vibrant Edwina amidst a crowd of adoring men. Edwina—so beautiful and alive his heart ached with the strength of his love.

The memory wavered and faded into the grayness of 1946. Edwina's youth, her frivolity and self-indulgence, had been burned away by the accumulated horrors of the last years. The first escapees from Hitler's death camps had shocked her deeply, and she had thrown herself into organizing rescue operations. When he had gone to India in 1942, Edwina's efforts had diminished the impact of the religious riots that accompanied Indian independence. And now her formidable energy was concentrated on improving medical services for the wounded soldiers and on planning the relief program for the civilian population when the Continent was finally liberated from Nazi control.

No, what had happened before the war had little bearing on today, any more than her friendship with Nehru could be compared with her sometimes scandalous affairs in the early years of their marriage. Those had been painful lessons for both of them, as she had tested, at times almost to the breaking point, the limits of their relationship. What neither of them had realized, until her work with the St. John Ambulance Brigade had focused her energies, was that she was searching for her own place in the world, for something not given to her because she was Lord Louis Mountbatten's wife or because she had inherited one of England's largest fortunes. Nehru

understood Edwina far better than he ever would, Mountbatten often thought, because Nehru did not complicate his love for her with expectations or restrictions Edwina could not tolerate. *If I could have learned that twenty-five years ago, how different things might have been!* But he had needed that many years and a war to recognize how unfairly he sometimes treated Edwina, and now someone was trying to capitalize on his slowness.

Mountbatten shook himself from his reverie, realizing with a start Lawton had been speaking to him. "Yes, George?"

"I just said, I was sorry for talking out of turn, my lord."

"Not at all, Commander." Mountbatten stood, tossed the blackmail letters onto the reports, and put the entire stack in his briefcase. "In fact, you may have given me the clue to this mess. Don't repeat what you said to anyone."

"What did I say that was so important, my lord?" Lawton's tone was puzzled.

Mountbatten smiled. "The past is the key to the present, George. Please tell Captain Michaels that I appreciate his diligence and his imagination, and that I will make good use of his speculations. And tell anyone else in the outfit who's worried, I have no intention of letting anyone hurt Lady Louis as long as I'm alive to prevent it. She's much too important to all of us."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Good night, George." Mountbatten headed out the door with a jaunty swing to his step. The search for Schmidt was about to take a new direction—without the help of Captain John Torrance.

"I don't see that these are as important as you think." Brigadier Sir Geoffrey Blackstone flipped through Schmidt's blackmail letters and tossed them onto the mahogany end table. He sprawled across Mountbatten's favorite overstuffed armchair like a half-full flour sack, projecting an air of avuncular kindness and wisdom. His casual manner contrasted sharply with the neat Edwardian room. Blackstone had served with Mountbatten's father and had been a family friend and advisor for many years, but tonight Mountbatten felt a puzzling reluctance to accept Blackstone's opinion at face value. "I appreciate what you're saying, Dickie. As head of Military Intelligence, you think I can expedite this investigation. But I'm sure you appreciate how my interfering would disrupt Captain Torrance's work."

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind, Sir Geoffrey." Mountbatten gritted his teeth to suppress a sharper reply. So far, Blackstone acted as though he had not heard anything Mountbatten had said. It was a bad sign, given Blackstone's connections with the Allied High Command and his knowledge of what was being discussed at the highest command levels.

"Actually, Dickie, we've been keeping a fairly close eye on this problem. I'm sure you know how awkward this could be for your career. Of course, this doesn't mean one thinks there's anything behind the accusations, mind you, but if word gets nosed around that

your wife is associating with a Nazi spy—well, you know how some of the Yanks would react. Some of their chaps are hard enough to deal with before they get their backs up about potential breaches of security. So we really would prefer to keep this investigation 'within the family,' if you take my meaning."

"Sir Geoffrey, those allegations are completely unfounded. Edwina is far too busy with her hospital work to have time for this sort of petty intrigue." Mountbatten took a deep breath, struggling to keep his voice free of the anger Blackstone's words ignited. Blackstone had no right to doubt his word about Edwina's activities. Schmidt's accusations were completely ludicrous to anyone aware of a tenth of Edwina's relief and medical efforts.

"Come now, Dickie. We've known each other long enough to call things by their proper names. You don't need to play the loyal husband here. Just between us, I know you and Edwina don't get along all that well." Blackstone shifted position to look the younger man in the face. "I'm talking about your future now. You're sharp enough to make out the big picture, as it were."

Mountbatten's anger chilled as he caught the drift of Blackstone's words. *Careful, Dickie*, he told himself. *Find out what he wants before you commit yourself.* His mind slipped into battle mode, assessing Blackstone with the same dispassionate thoroughness he would an attacking Nazi fleet. His emotions, his personal involvement, retreated as he baited his trap and waited for Blackstone to respond. "What about my future?"

"Not meaning to dredge up unpleasant memories, but in the past, there were certain events that were rather an embarrassment to you. It don't look well for that sort of thing to happen to a senior officer, and this Schmidt chap is trying to rake up all the old unpleasantness. What with the direction the Yanks are taking lately on security matters, the High Command must look carefully at the sorts of baggage a man brings with him to the higher echelons."

"Yes?" Mountbatten found it hard to keep a dangerous edge out of his voice. If he had not known better, Blackstone's insinuations would have convinced Mountbatten that the other man had spent the last decade commanding the Pretoria Guards or the Adelaide Garrison. The war effort and the need to fight a greater enemy had gone far to heal the major rifts between him and Edwina, as had Mountbatten's outspoken pride in Edwina's achievements. Her profound delight in his accomplishments, both in India and since, had been the capstone to his happiness in their revitalized marriage. If, on occasion, their differences still erupted into violent rows, as they had so often in the early years of their union, Mountbatten figured it was no one's business but their own.

"You're an ambitious young fellow, Dickie. Given the Yanks' opinions on certain kinds of notoriety, one hopes you can see your way clear to cut your losses, as it were. One hates to think that a promising young officer might get passed over because he couldn't act fast enough to get his ship out of port when the shooting started."

"Would you spell out exactly what you're saying, Sir Geoffrey? Edwina is making a significant contribution to



the war effort, and I don't see why I should let a few threatening letters destroy my family."

"Under the circumstances, it's regrettable that you cannot see the situation from an outside viewpoint." Blackstone hauled himself to his feet. "One had hoped you would display the imagination we were looking for in the future commander of the *St. George*."

Mountbatten drew a deep breath, feeling numb with shock. He knew which American generals Blackstone was invoking as a threat—a pair of Southerners so wrapped in their Bibles that Mountbatten wondered how they had found time for the Army—and, given the opportunity, Mountbatten knew he could charm the stars off their uniforms. However, Blackstone was pushing events, cutting off his options and leaving him no course but to stall for time. Mountbatten reached for the letters and handed two of them to Blackstone. "I will consider your . . . suggestion . . . on one condition. Will you run as detailed a security check on Torrance as he has been doing on my people? I don't understand the direction his investigation is taking, and I want to know his prejudices. I really cannot consider making so consequential a decision based on information being supplied to me by someone I do not trust."

Blackstone stared at the letters in Mountbatten's hand for several moments before taking them. "Very well, Dickie. Bad as this latest makes things for you, I suppose it's unrealistic for one to expect you to make any substantive decisions without reassurance of Torrance's abilities. Although one would think you would have a higher regard for your sister-in-law's fiancé. The Chiefs of Staff are trying to arrange this investigation to minimize the embarrassment to you."

"I appreciate the consideration, Sir Geoffrey. However, you must forgive me if I tend to weigh my wife's judgment somewhat ahead of her sister's. And thank you for investigating Torrance for me." Operating on automatic pilot, his mind occupied with untangling the politics behind Blackstone's implied ultimatum, Mountbatten escorted Blackstone to the front door.

The stack of papers in front of him seemed to grow as the evening wore on, Nehru thought, sucking him deeper and deeper into the morass of cooperative military agreements and mutual defense pacts. The illusion was born of the late hour and compounded by his aversion to violence, particularly the present organized mayhem engulfing every country on the globe. Nehru was appalled to be India's wartime head of state and to be giving orders that caused the deaths of thousands of Indian soldiers. Many nights, as he struggled with the guilt caused by sacrificing long-held principles to bitter pragmatism, Nehru wondered if he had overlooked another option.

Gandhi had counseled nonviolence, even when confronted with the Japanese assault force that had claimed his life. After seeing the torn and bloodied corpse of his friend and mentor displayed as a Japanese trophy, Nehru could no longer believe that passive resistance would overcome the Japanese as it had the English. Barbarism on the level of destroying villages to the last infant and

grandmother had to be opposed with force. Although his soul died a little with each Indian soldier lost in battle, Nehru found some consolation in seeing how proud the Indian Army was to defend their new nation.

Postponing the inevitable, Nehru let his glance wander around the room. The India suite in Commonwealth House had once been the London headquarters for India's colonial government, and it still bore traces of former glory. The doors and window frames were dark wood, as was the ornate trim on the walls and the massive, old-fashioned desk. The burgundy-pinstriped wallpaper, dotted with sprays of pink roses, had been new, Nehru judged, in the early years of Queen Victoria's rule, and most of the photographs dated from the same period. Nehru supposed he should be offended that no one had removed such blatant reminders of the old order, but at the moment he had little energy to spare for tasteless decor.

With a sigh, Nehru turned back to the documents on his desk. High-level pacts granting the Americans the right to operate their planes from Indian airfields and to station combat troops on Indian soil, a pledge to provide three Indian regiments to the European theater in exchange for three dozen more English officers to advise and train more Indian commanders, a memorandum of understanding concerning a new commander for the Southeast Asian sector, agreements on amounts and timing of arms shipments. No matter how his soul rebelled, no matter how the continued bloodshed sickened him, Nehru knew he must review the pacts before his final meeting with Churchill tomorrow. He owed it to India to obtain for her the tools necessary for her defense.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Relieved at the distraction, he called, "Enter."

The door swung open and his younger aide entered. Ramesh Khan, limping heavily on the leg shattered by Japanese bullets in the first year of the war, carried a large box, its top partly open and still mostly wrapped in tan paper. "A soldier just delivered this for you, sir. Security said they were told to have me bring it up immediately."

A touch of suspicion tickled Nehru's mind. He frowned, trying to analyze his uneasiness. In the late-night stillness, the ticking of the clock seemed very loud. "Who did you say sent it?"

"I didn't say, sir," Khan set the box on the edge of the desk and turned it to read the smudged writing on the torn edge of the paper. Inside the box, Nehru could see the cloth-covered grille of a wireless set. "It looks like a capital 'E' and a last name. I'm not sure, is it an 'N' or—"

"Mountbatten?" Nehru's lips framed the word. He started to reach for the package. Suddenly, with perfect certainty, he knew Edwina had *not* sent him that box. She would have given him the present herself, for the joy of sharing the moment with him. "Ramesh, take that back to Security and have them check it over again."

Khan picked up the box and started for the door. A thunderous detonation ruptured the box and the concussion threw Nehru to the floor. Flying metal peppered

the room. Thick, acrid smoke filled the air, burning Nehru's eyes and making him gasp for breath. Except for the ringing in his ears, the room seemed totally silent.

"Khan?" Nehru called. His voice sounded like a whisper and, frightened, he yelled louder. Silence was the only reply. He crawled out from behind the desk and pulled himself to his feet. The smoke was thicker when he stood, and he started coughing, unable to get enough air to breathe. Tears streamed down his face, blinding him.

Cautiously, he worked his way around the desk, running his hand along its edge to guide him. A sliver of wood jabbed his palm. He bent closer, until he could see through the clearing smoke. The front corner of the desk had been reduced to splinters by shrapnel.

Nehru dropped to his knees and crawled forward, searching for his aide. Khan's body was three feet from the desk. Blood, bone, and flesh from the ruins of his chest and face were sprayed across the floor. Nehru's stomach spasmed with horror. Turning aside, he retched until his stomach was empty.

When Brigadier Blackstone was safely off the premises, Mountbatten, still operating by habit rather than thought, made his way to Edwina's study. He leaned against the door, trying to sort through his options. Blackstone had given him two equally unpalatable alternatives and, even through the anger building inside him, Mountbatten felt the pain of each choice gnaw at him.

He entered the study and stood against the door, watching Edwina. She sat in the small puddle of light cast by her desk lamp. It painted a golden blush across her cheekbones and picked out the fiery highlights in her hair. Behind her thick spectacles, her blue eyes were bloodshot and dark-shadowed. When she was so tired, it was hard to remember that, before the war, she had been one of the most beautiful women in Europe. Where had Blackstone gotten his information—factually accurate but so far from any emotional truth? Stormy though their relationship was, Mountbatten knew he needed Edwina. Without her fire and intelligence to challenge him and goad him on, he would have achieved little in his life. Mountbatten could not imagine living without Edwina any more than he could imagine himself abandoning his naval career. Blackstone had no concept of what he had asked.

Edwina looked up from her writing. "Is something wrong, Dickie? You look terrible."

He told her, in short, clipped sentences leached of all emotion. Anything else would have left him open to his mounting anger, which he must suppress if he was to analyze this problem rationally, and vulnerable to the inevitable pain, which he could not yet comprehend and with which he must come to grips before he could find an alternative to Blackstone's implied ultimatum.

"That's it, then," Edwina said when he finished. "If I'm hurting your chances for promotion, I'll go away."

He stared at her, caught off guard by her response. She had always believed in and supported his decision

to pursue a naval career, even when their relationship had been the most strained. However, he had not expected her to accede to Blackstone's demand so quietly. "What? Where?" he asked in a stunned voice.

"How should I know?" She shrugged, as if the decision was of little importance. "India?" Her tone was dreary; Mountbatten could not remember ever hearing so much defeat in her voice.

"Would you stay with Jawaharlal?"

"Should I?" She rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Does it matter?"

"Damn it, yes! You're my wife, Edwina. I need you here with me." He crossed to the window with quick strides. His hand clutched at the drapes, crushing the heavy fabric, and he wished it were Blackstone's neck he was squeezing. "There are four things I love in this life. I haven't had time for polo in seven years, and India is halfway around the world." He turned to face her, his shoulders rigid with anguish. "Now it seems I must choose between the last two."

"No." A hint of emotion flickered across her face. She came to his side, as always closing ranks with him when he needed her. "What you're doing is important. I can't destroy your contribution to the war effort."

"Your work is equally important. What you do for morale is incalculable."

Edwina shrugged, her expression still guarded but with a trace of life in her eyes. "Morale helps, but without good commanders, all the morale in the world won't win battles. And if we don't win the battles, there's nothing left for any of us. So if it comes to that, there's really no choice."

Her apparent indifference finally broke his control. "How," he asked in a shaking voice, "can you discuss this so calmly, when just the thought is tearing me apart?"

A smile of intense relief replaced the emotionless mask. "If you want to, we'll fight it out together. They're just jealous of you, anyway." She slid her arms around him, her body molding itself to his.

He buried his face in her hair, shaken by how deeply her familiar, beloved scent moved him. Her breath on his neck was warm and comforting. "I can face anything, if you're with me, darling." His arms tightened around her, holding her close to show her how much he needed her. Her touch, her nearness, gave him the courage to continue. "Do you really want to go?"

"No. I'm needed here." She lifted her head to look in his eyes. "I am. Not the wife of Lord Louis Mountbatten or the heiress to England's largest fortune, but *me*. Edwina. I wouldn't willingly give that up for anything."

"What about Jawaharlal?"

Edwina's face softened at the name. She thought a moment, then the tired lines of her face melted into a smile. "Maybe I want to keep something in my life free of the mess I usually make of such things. On the other hand"—her smile broadened—"I've spent twenty-five years training you to be a good husband. I don't have enough time and energy left to start the project over again."

An answering grin lit his face. He leaned over, kissing

her deeply to silence her teasing. Was there anyone else, he wondered, who could read him the way Edwina could? For a brief moment, he felt like he was a twenty-two-year-old bridegroom again. "I hope they catch this Schmidt soon. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Rise above their narrow-mindedness, Dickie. You'll be vindicated in the end." She released herself from his embrace and returned to her desk. Picking up the paper she had been working on, she turned to him. "Do I have this right? It's the relief plans for liberated Russia. For the first week after the landings, the troops will be advancing over Free Russian territory and assembling in Moscow for the southern offensive. During that time, the *St. George* will be used exclusively for sending in more men and weapons as fast as the planes can turn over. The northern areas are lightly settled and have not been occupied, so our relief efforts will be minimal."

Mountbatten nodded. "Some food, and a small amount of medical aid, most likely."

"After that, your forces will be moving into occupied territory, and we will need correspondingly more food and medical supplies. Is the one-month estimate still good for the reconquest of Stalingrad?"

It hit both of them at the same time. Edwina's face went white and she dropped the paper, pressing her hands against the desk to control her shaking. "My God, Dickie. If anyone studied our relief plans, they could guess your complete battle orders. It never occurred to me."

"I doubt it's that serious. You've told me that you're the only person with a complete copy of the plans. Besides, your timetables are fairly general. Any sensible person would make similar guesses about our timing."

"Even so, I'm not taking any chances. Tomorrow, Nancie and I will remove everything from the files that even suggests a schedule. Schmidt already knows more about us than I care to think about."

"Too true, darling. Maybe you're right. It would be tragic if your plans for saving lives were used against us."

She rubbed her hand across her forehead. The shock had chiseled the lines of exhaustion deeper into her face and her skin looked gray with fatigue. "Let's hope no one else has thought of this already."

"As long as you don't have any actual dates, I think it's probably safe." Mountbatten realized he didn't care what the Nazis did with Edwina's relief plans tonight, if only she would quit working now and get some rest. However, she showed no signs of leaving her desk.

"No dates, but I'm worried about the internal chronology. It's as tight as I can make it."

Mountbatten forced a laugh. "Then you'd better give it to me, because the invasion planners will certainly need it to know what their schedule should be."

Without protest, Edwina handed him the paper. "If I'm planning your battles now, will you take over relief for the liberated civilians?"

"Hardly." This time, Mountbatten's chuckle was genuine. "I couldn't begin to handle it as well as you do. I just wish all of my staff were as good with schedules."

"Keep after them. They'll learn."

"One hopes." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Don't work too late rewriting those plans, darling. Things may change yet again."

"The fortunes of war?" One dark eyebrow lifted in question. "Are you planning anything specific?"

"Would I tell you?" he teased before relaxing to his normal composure. "Please, darling, don't work too late."

"Yes, Commodore." She grinned up at Mountbatten, daring him to make her stop.

Mountbatten refused to take the bait. "You are far more important to the war effort than I think you realize, Edwina. Please don't overdo on the work. You won't do anyone a bit of good from one of your own hospital beds."

"Very well, Dickie. Not too much later."

He started for the door, wondering how long she would be at her desk. Not that it really mattered—when he tried to stop Edwina after she made up her mind to do something, he usually came out second best.

His hand was on the doorknob when the phone rang. Struck by a premonition, he turned back toward her.

"Mountbatten," Edwina said into the mouthpiece.

There was a pause, during which all color drained from her face. Then, "When? Was anyone injured? . . . We'll be there right away."

"What is it?" he asked.

Edwina dropped the receiver into its cradle and stood, tipping her chair over backwards in her haste. "An explosion at Commonwealth House. In the India suite."

"Jawahar!?" Mountbatten threw the door open and charged down the hall, with Edwina jogging to keep up with his long strides.

"Unknown. They've sent for Intelligence, so my informant—thought we should know at once. Even before she heard any details."

"I see. Well, nobody'd better get in my way, because I'm going to set a new record getting down there."

*To be concluded*

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